



award-winning,
bestselling author
**MARIE
HIGGINS**

A GROOM
for
BLAZE

the
**BLIZZARD
BRIDES**
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A GROOM FOR BLAZE

By Marie Higgins

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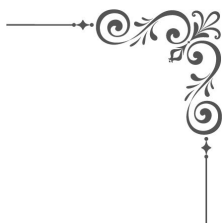
EPILOGUE

More stories from The Blizzard Brides Series

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Author's Bio

Blaze Murphy needs to get married to help her family stay in Last Chance, Nebraska. Finding a mail-order husband doesn't leave her much room for love. However, she has already given her heart to her childhood friend, Colt Masterson... a man who isn't ready to settle down. Having him so near makes her realize that life without love is no life at all.



ONE

Colt Masterson stepped out of the stagecoach and onto the boardwalk. He brushed his hands against his dusty jacket before removing his cowboy hat and brushing the dust off that, too. Today's journey was long but necessary. Last Chance, Nebraska, was out in the middle of nowhere. Colt had traveled quite a bit in his twenty-eight years, but he'd never known this place even existed. When his father described what had happened to the town a year ago, Colt's heart wrenched for the women who had suddenly become widows.

He glanced up and down the street. From what he'd heard, the town seemed to be growing. But Colt was still needed whether he wanted it to be or not.

A movement from the stagecoach drew his attention as the driver took down Colt's trunk. He moved to the trunk, grabbed the handle, and swung it over his shoulder as if it were a bag of flour. He'd labored so much in his life, carrying the trunk was nothing.

However, now his responsibilities were changing, thanks to his grandfather and the cuss word that churned Colt's stomach – *inheritance*.

Clenching his jaw, Colt moved back to the boardwalk. He needed to find a place to stay, and he was told Last Chance had a hotel. He hoped they had a vacant room.

He swept his gaze up and down the street again until he noticed the hotel. Several women were moving in and out of shops, and a few others drove their wagons on the road. Most of them eyed him,

but he wasn't sure if they were married or looking for a husband. It didn't matter. He wasn't here for their pleasure, anyway. He was here to fulfill the terms of his agreement with both his father and grandfather by taking over the wainwright shop that his father had started six months ago in this town.

Although Colt was rather good at repairing wagons and especially wheels, that's not what he wanted to do with his life. Unfortunately, Father's health was declining, and since the new shop was booming, someone needed to run it. Colt would do it, but he wasn't happy about it.

"Excuse me, sir?"

The woman's voice brought him out of his thoughts, and he turned to rest his lonely gaze on the vision of surprise that stood beside him. She had the prettiest hazel eyes and lush, wavy, dark auburn hair that was pulled away from her face in a ponytail. What startled him was that she wasn't dressed as fancy as the other women he'd seen in town. In fact, although she wore a plain yellow blouse and brown skirt, she looked to be... out of place. Maybe it was because her hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

He quickly removed his hat and set his trunk down out of politeness. "Yes?"

"Colt Masterson?"

"I am."

She smiled, and he realized even her smile was pretty.

"You probably don't remember me since we haven't seen each other for ten years, but I'm Blaze Murphy. You knew me as Blaze Clifton. I work for your father now, and I've come to take you to his shop."

Blaze Clifton? He recalled his father saying that he'd brought Colt's stepmother's family to Last Chance. Blaze Clifton was his stepmother's niece. He had become instant friends with her, mainly because she had lost her parents and he had lost his mother. They did everything together for a few months before he left to work for his grandfather.

Colt grinned. She hadn't changed that much – still, the cute tomboy who climbed trees with him and roped cattle.

"Of course, I remember you."

She sighed heavily and her shoulders relaxed. "Splendid. I didn't want you to think I was just some woman trying to hustle you."

He laughed loudly and wrapped his arms around her, lifting her

to swing her around. She gasped, clutching his shoulders.

“Blaze,” he said with entirely too much enthusiasm. Then again, a few moments ago, he’d thought he wouldn’t find anyone in town to talk to, so he was happy to see her. “It’s so good to see you after all this time.”

Her smile stretched. When he placed her back on her feet, she pulled away from him.

“Yes, it’s good to see you.” She glanced over his shoulder. “Did you bring your wife?”

He snorted a laugh. “My wife? Where did you hear I’d gotten married because I assure you, the rumor is false.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Her cheeks grew pink. “I thought I’d heard your father mention you were engaged a couple of years ago.”

He shook his head. “I was, but thankfully, I came to my senses and broke off the engagement.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Was she a terrible person?”

“No, but I would have made a lousy husband. I can’t stay in one place long enough to have a family.”

“Well, I’m happy if you’re happy.”

“Yes, it was a good thing for me to do.”

She motioned to the wagon not far from them. “That is your father’s wagon. You can put your trunk in the back, and I’ll take you to the shop.”

Colt lifted the trunk again and proceeded to follow her to the wagon. A large middle-aged woman rushed past Blaze, bumping into her on her way past. She stumbled and fell against Colt. His arm shot out and wrapped around her waist, holding her steady.

Blaze’s wide eyes met his stare, and she sucked in a quick breath. She definitely wasn’t a young girl any longer. An odd sensation filled him, warming him quickly. The feeling unnerved him, so he dropped his hold and stepped back.

Blaze grumbled as she turned and glared at the woman who’d been so rude. “The least Mrs. Hubbard could do was apologize.”

Her voice had lifted in irritation, loud enough for the older woman to hear, but the woman continued marching up the boardwalk.

“Yeah,” Colt chuckled, “you’d think she owned the town or something.”

She glanced at him and gave him a smile. “Or something.”

When they reached the wagon, he set his trunk in the back. He

turned to help her up, but she was already climbing up to the seat and taking the reins. Holding back a grin, he climbed up beside her on the seat.

“So,” he cleared his throat, “why are you here to get me? Why didn’t my father come?”

Blaze turned her face up to look at him, but her smile was slowly disappearing. “Your father has been very ill lately. Between your stepmother and me, we have been the ones working in the shop.”

Colt frowned. “Father is too sick to work?”

“Sometimes.” She shrugged before whipping the reins to urge the team of horses forward. “Today he has been trying to do something, but usually, he just sits in his chair and oversees our work.”

Unease settled in the pit of Colt’s stomach. He didn’t want to hear this. He wanted his father healthy enough to run the shop by himself so that Colt could do other things he enjoyed more. He hadn’t gotten along with his father for ten years – since his father married Lisa.

He touched Blaze’s arm. “Be honest with me. How bad is he?”

She sighed and frowned, keeping her focus on the road ahead. “He caught pneumonia two months ago, and he hasn’t fully recovered. I’m worried about his health. On days he feels good, he’s working, but then that wears him out, and he’s home in bed for a few days just to recover.”

Colt nodded. “That’s my pop. I pray he pulls through.”

“As do I.”

“Are you and my stepmother the only ones working in the shop?”

“No. Teddy and Leroy help us quite a bit.”

Colt gasped. “Are they old enough?”

Blaze chuckled. “Teddy is fourteen, and Leroy is twelve.”

“The years just flew by.” He shook his head. “I can’t imagine them that age. To me, they are still ragamuffins.”

“Oh, they will be fine men one day.”

“What about Emma and Dakota?” Colt recalled Blaze had two younger cousins, even though they were turning out to be pristine and didn’t have the time of day for getting dirty – which is what made Blaze so much fun to be with when Colt was younger.

“They are also working at the shop.”

“What?” Colt barked a laugh. “And getting dirt under their fingernails? That’s horrible.”

She grinned. “Well, they still complain about that, but not as much.”

“Is that all who helps out?”

“Yes, that’s all.”

He studied her profile and arched an eyebrow. “And the shop is still thriving with *women* fixing wagons?”

She gave him a smirk. “Hah, I see you brought your dry humor with you to Last Chance.”

He squared his shoulders, puffing out his chest. “My *dry* humor and my good looks are the only things that get me through life. I’d be nothing without them.”

She cocked her head. “Don’t forget that oversized ego of yours.”

Laughing, he bumped his arm against hers. “And I see you haven’t lost your fun teasing nature.”

“Never.” She grinned.

As he studied her, he wondered if she had gotten married. Then again, if she had, her husband would be helping her and Lisa with the shop. “Blaze? Why didn’t you get married?”

When she glanced at him this time, there was no laughter in her expression. “I did, Colt. My husband died in the blizzard that killed most of the men in Last Chance. Not long after that, Aunt Lisa and your father came out here to help me.”

His chest tightened. “Oh, Blaze. I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “That’s all right. I barely knew my husband, anyway. We hadn’t been married long before he died.”

He smiled at her, hoping it would brighten up her face. “Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll find another man soon.”

“Actually,” she turned her gaze back to the road as she slowed the horses down, “I will be getting married in a few weeks.”

Once more, shock washed over him. “You are?”

“Because this town needs more men, and...” She exhaled deeply. “The shop needs some help.” Her throat jumped with a hard swallow. “A month ago, I found a mail-order groom. He’ll be coming to Last Chance later this month.”

Colt didn’t like how his chest continued to tighten. Blaze was his friend, and he didn’t like the idea of her marrying a man she didn’t love. Perhaps he’d be able to help her with that. After all, that was what friends did.

Blaze slowed the team of horses as they approached a barn. A large sign was nailed to the entrance – *Masterson's Wainwright*. The barn appeared spacious enough to park at least three wagons inside that needed repair and all the necessary tools to work on the rigs. Colt was proud of his father for the accomplishment of owning such a fine shop, and yet... now, the man was sick and expecting his wife and her family to run the place. That didn't set well with Colt.

Once Blaze had stopped the horses, he jumped down and turned to assist her. She stared at him with confusion written on her face.

"What are you doing?"

He laughed. "Being a gentleman."

Smiling, she patted his arm. "I knew there was a gentleman in there somewhere, but I was afraid you'd lost that over the years."

She took his hand and climbed down, keeping her gaze locked with his. Heavens, he liked seeing her hazel eyes sparkle when she smiled.

He shrugged. "I haven't completely lost it."

Why hadn't he noticed how pretty she was ten years ago? Then again, he'd always thought of her as a cute tomboy. Why would he think anything else? Her hair had always been pulled back in a ponytail. Rarely had he seen her in a dress, and even though she wore one now, he could see it didn't fit her personality.

Back home in Colorado, Blaze had done everything a boy could do. There were a few things she did better than boys her age. She'd been very competitive, and Colt enjoyed her frequent challenges. It had made him try harder to do things, which helped keep his mind off his deceased mother. Blaze had been exactly what he had needed ten years ago.

Of course, he was sure that she didn't go around wrestling with her brothers as she had with Colt back in the day. He suspected she'd feel all soft and womanly in his arms, just as when she'd fallen against him when the older woman pushed into her on the boardwalk.

Why did I think that? He shook his head slowly as he moved his gaze back to his father's shop. He shouldn't be thinking such thoughts about Blaze. She was his friend and nothing more.

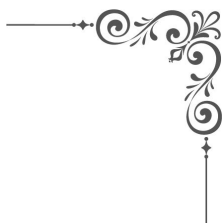
And yet... He glanced at her again. She looked different somehow. Her dark auburn hair seemed to shine more, bringing out her red streaks a little better. Her eyes appeared more green than brown. She actually looked *very* pretty right now.

What is wrong with me? He shook away the strange thoughts filling his head and took his first step toward the barn. Taking a deep breath, he prepared to see his father again. Hopefully, they would be able to talk easier with one another instead of arguing the whole time.

“You can do this,” she said softly, touching his arm.

He looked at her. “You were always able to help me through the frustration I held for my father.”

She smiled brightly. “And I’ll be here now. Don’t worry. Things will be different this time around. I promise.”



TWO

Blaze Murphy bunched her hands into fists and held her breath.

Why is he looking at me that way? The excited thudding of her heart made it hard to concentrate on anything else but the ruggedly handsome man beside her.

Her breaths were faster than normal, and she tried to calm the nerves jumping around inside her chest. She had known Colt too long for him to start thinking of her as anything other than his friend. It didn't matter that she had fallen in love with him ten years ago. Time had passed, and they were no longer those two teenagers who did everything together.

Being orphaned at a young age, Blaze was sent to live with her aunt. It was difficult to make friends, which was why she decided to be a tomboy. That way, she didn't have to follow the rules of etiquette, as her cousins Emma and Dakota had done.

Seeing Colt after all these years had brought back feelings that she'd buried after he had left home. His hair was darker now, almost black. No longer was he reed-thin. Instead, he was so much more muscular than she could have imagined. And handsome! She sighed. How could she look at his whiskered-shadowed face and incredible blue eyes without melting?

Regardless, she had to. She would be getting married soon, and she needed to be responsible. The shop needed her future husband, especially because she expected Colt to leave in a few months. He never stayed in one place for very long, anyway.

He stopped in front of the main door, so she stopped, too.

Anxiousness was clear in his expression. She wanted to hold his hand and reassure him she'd always be here to help. Yet, after she had taken his hand when he assisted her down from the wagon, her pulse raced with excitement as warmth flowed through her. Since she didn't need to feel *that* way about him, she just wouldn't touch him at all.

Colt released a heavy breath. "Well, I suppose I need to get this over with sooner rather than later."

"Yes. That would be the best thing to do."

He opened the door for her and then followed. The consistent whack of hammering echoed through the barn, mixed with voices. Blaze heard her cousins' bickering, which was a daily occurrence. Teddy, being the oldest, thought he needed to correct his younger brother. And, of course, Leroy didn't want to be told when he was doing something wrong.

The boys were the first ones to see Colt, which made them pause in their work. Both boys held the same awestruck expressions when they looked at the stepbrother they didn't remember.

Aunt Lisa sat at the desk with her back toward them. But once the hammering stopped, the middle-aged woman turned in the chair. A smile broke out on her wrinkled face, and she quickly stood and walked toward Colt.

"Oh, look at you," Aunt Lisa exclaimed. "You're as handsome as your father."

Inwardly, Blaze cringed. She knew Colt well enough to know he wouldn't like that type of compliment.

"Lisa." Colt's smile was forced. "The years have been kind."

Blaze bit her bottom lip. Colt's lie was quite comical, especially since they all knew that the wear and tear of George's health and moving from Colorado to Nebraska had taken its toll on Lisa's body. Her once dark brown hair was now streaked with gray, and every year, her wrinkles multiplied.

Aunt Lisa stopped in front of Colt and grasped his hands. "It's good to see you again. Thank you for coming to help your father."

It wasn't a secret, but nobody wanted to talk about *why* Colt had come. They all knew his grandfather had bribed him with money.

Colt glanced around the barn. "Where is my father?"

Aunt Lisa motioned toward the back of the barn. "I sent him home to rest." She looked at Blaze. "Will you show Colt to the house?"

“Of course.” Blaze nodded.

Colt sauntered toward Teddy and Leroy, who were both holding up a wagon wheel. Colt ruffled each boy’s hair. “You two have grown up into strapping young men.”

The boys’ chests puffed with pride as their expressions brightened. Blaze wanted to laugh out loud but refrained.

Teddy jumped to his feet. “I can’t wait to learn from you. Pa said you are very accomplished.”

Blaze’s heart melted from her cousin’s compliment, but seeing the genuine smile on Colt’s mouth made her heartbeat skip a beat. She was relieved that Colt didn’t say anything snarky to the stepbrother he had never wanted.

“I’m sure I’ll be learning things from you and your brother, as well.” Colt winked. “I haven’t repaired a wagon in a few years.”

The boys nodded vigorously. Their gazes sparkled with happiness.

Colt looked at Blaze. “Show me where the house is.”

She moved past him and toward the back door of the barn. From the road, the house was hard to see since the large barn blocked it. But once they had walked out of the barn, the two-story, white-washed house with the wrap-around porch stood proudly. George had purchased the place when the previous owner had lost her husband and son during the blizzard a year ago. The widow had decided to move to Utah and live with her sister, so she sold her house for a ridiculously low price.

“Nice place,” Colt said as they stepped onto the porch.

“Yes, and you’ll see that the inside is very roomy, too.”

Glancing at her, he arched an eyebrow. “I’ll have my own bedroom?”

“Of course. In fact, there is a room in the barn that you can use if you want more privacy.”

He shrugged. “That actually might be better for me since I’m not sure how I’ll get along with my father.”

“That’s understandable.”

As they reached the porch steps, she tried hurrying up, but the hem of her skirt tangled in her boots. She fell on her knees on the second step. Embarrassment filled her, and she wanted to find a hole and bury herself.

“Blaze, are you all right?” Colt grasped her arm, bending to her level.

She laughed uncomfortably. "Oh, you know me. Always finding new ways to get bruised." She looked up into his caring eyes.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you weren't used to wearing skirts."

Heat exploded in her face, and she was sure her red face would be seen in a fog. "You know me well."

He chuckled and helped her stand. "Well, you don't have to dress up on my account. If you feel like wearing trousers, then wear them."

"I would, but my aunt is trying to turn me into a lady." She shrugged. "She's afraid my soon-to-be husband is going to take one look at me and run the other way."

"Nah." Colt stroked her heated cheek. "You're too pretty. He'll love you immediately."

Her gaze met his intense stare. Just as she didn't want it to happen, her heartbeat quickened with excitement, making her breathing faster than it had been before.

His gaze jumped from her eyes to her mouth. She swallowed hard. *Move away, now! This isn't right!* And yet, as hard as her mind screamed at her, she couldn't move. She enjoyed the way he caressed her cheek.

But there was no way this could happen between them. She'd fall in love with him all over again, and he'd leave just as he'd done before.

The heat in her face intensified, so she quickly turned the other way as she took the steps slower this time. The stinging in her knees wasn't as terrible as the shame washing over her.

He opened the door for her, and she walked inside. She moved toward the sitting room, since this was where George usually occupied his time when he wasn't feeling well. Today, he sat in his heavily cushioned chair, reading the newspaper. He glanced up at her, but then his gaze shifted to Colt, who came in behind her.

Happiness lightened George's sick eyes, and he smiled. "Colt! You're here."

As he struggled to stand, Colt moved past her to help his father out of the chair. The older man threw his arms around his son, hugging him tightly. Tears of joy filled George's eyes. Blaze's eyes misted over as well from witnessing their reunion. She prayed Colt was just as happy as his father, but she doubted he would be. Those two hadn't been able to get along since she first met Colt.

Hopefully, the two men would be able to fix things with their relationship while George was still alive.

COLT SAT ON THE BLACK leather chair in his father's study, staring out the window as the sun sank on the horizon. Orange, pink, and red with splashes of blue painted the sky. He enjoyed watching the sun, realizing that sunsets here were still just as beautiful as anywhere in the world.

And speaking of beautiful... Immediately, Blaze's face popped into his mind. He couldn't count how many times during the past twenty-four hours that he had replayed the moment when the earth stood still while caressing her cheek after she had tripped on the stairs. Their gazes had melded together in some kind of passionate, silent communication. Something had sparked within him, and he saw it in her eyes, too.

Why would he think of her this way now? She was his friend and nothing more. He needed a friend more than he did a female companion to warm his arms and kiss passionately.

Sighing, he leaned back in the chair and twirled a black mask with his finger. Apparently, Last Chance's doctor, Cade Hamilton, was throwing a costume party for his wife's birthday. From what Colt's father had told him, Last Chance had been growing in the past several months, and the town needed a party to get to know each other.

The household had known about this for weeks, and although Colt didn't want to attend, Lisa made sure he had a costume. Now he had no other choice. Lately, his options were being stripped from him, and he didn't know how to fight them.

The door to the study opened and in walked his frail father, using a cane for help. Colt's father no longer had thick, black hair, instead his hair had receded on his forehead and was turning gray. Once upon a time, George Masterson had been a robust man, but now... time had taken its toll on him.

"There you are," his father said, closing the door behind him. "I wondered where you had disappeared."

Colt shrugged and turned his focus back to the astonishing sunset. "I'm here, just trying to talk myself out of going to that costume party tonight."

"Now, Son, you should really go. Lisa spent a lot of time on your

costume. It would be wrong to let her down.”

“Yeah, I know. But I was hoping to do something in the barn tonight.” Colt glanced over his shoulder at his father. “Doesn’t something need to be repaired?”

His father shook his head. “Colt, you need to relax tonight and meet people. That’s what this party will help you with. There will be many single women there, and I’m sure you’ll find someone who interests you.”

Once again, Blaze’s face popped into his mind, and he quickly ushered it out. “I’m not going to meet women, Father.”

His father smiled. “Of course, you are. I know my son.”

Colt slowly turned in the chair, studying his father’s expression warily. The old man knew something, Colt could tell. “What’s so special about tonight?”

“Well, Lisa has a friend in town who has a single daughter. We want you to meet Susan Wilson. She’s really pretty, and I know you’ll like her.”

Colt groaned, and he didn’t care if his father heard him or not. “Father, stop trying to play matchmaker.”

The old man’s mouth tightened. “If I don’t, who will? You certainly won’t.”

They hadn’t spoken for all this time, and yet things hadn’t changed at all. His father wanted to argue with Colt, and he wanted to push back. He was tired of this game. “Fine, I’ll meet her, but I’m not promising anything.”

His father’s face relaxed. “You’ll instantly love her. She’s so very charming and intelligent.”

Knowing he couldn’t fight this forever, Colt stood and placed the black mask on his face. His disguise was the midnight bandit, which was the only thing Lisa could come up with at the last minute. “What is Susan’s costume tonight? I’ll seek her out and make introductions.”

“Lisa’s friend says her daughter will be dressed as Cleopatra.”

Colt rolled his eyes. Of course, she would. Most women who wanted to catch a man’s attention dressed as an Egyptian seductress. All he wanted to do tonight was finish this facade. The quicker he could meet the woman, the quicker he could tell his father that he wasn’t interested.

He stood and stepped to the door, but his father grasped his arm, stopping him.

“There’s one more thing you should know. I don’t know how much longer I have to live. I want you to take over Masterson’s Wainwright. My expectation is for you to fill my shoes, but to do that, you must get your life in order and settle down. I want you to marry, have children, and raise your kids better than I have raised you.”

Anger mixed with helpless frustration boiled inside Colt. Was this a threat? Although he shouldn’t take it as such, how else could he feel when his father threw this at him?

Clearing his throat, Colt squared his shoulders, meeting his father’s direct stare. “And what if I don’t want to settle down in Last Chance?”

His father expelled a heavy breath. “Then I don’t know who is going to take care of Lisa and her children.”

“Father.” Colt sighed and folded his arms. “I love you, but I’m telling you now. You can’t force me into a life I don’t want. If and when I get married and have children, it’s because I want them.”

His father’s mouth tightened, and he nodded. “I understand.”

Blowing out a frustrated breath, Colt left the study and headed toward the front of the house. Everyone had already left for the doctor’s party, and he suddenly wanted to be anywhere but here.

He saddled a horse and rode toward the destination. Lisa had told him where the party would be. A slight breeze stirred the leaves in the trees, and a full moon lit the way. Soon, he arrived at a large barn that was lit up with lamps. Fiddles were playing inside, and a parade of costumes filled the barn as the people moved from group to group, chatting.

As Colt entered, he noticed a few women dressed as Marie Antoinette and three men dressed as the French King Louis XVI. So far, he hadn’t seen anyone who wore the midnight bandit costume.

Colt scanned the room and recognized many historical costumes. He even saw Lisa and her children. But he couldn’t find Blaze. He figured she’d be easy to spot because of her pretty auburn hair.

He turned away from the dancers, ready to go in search of the punch bowl... when he saw her – the woman his parents wanted him to meet. Cleopatra. Wearing the silky white dress of the famous Egyptian seductress, the woman’s black wig reached her shoulders with beads of gold hanging from her jeweled headdress that matched the wide golden collar circling her neck and shoulders. On her face was a white, golden-jeweled mask. Circling her wrists were

matching bracelets. On her feet were golden sandals.

He hated to admit it, but although he couldn't see her face, the rest of her was very well put together. But he knew that if he wasn't impressed with a woman's mind and personality, it didn't matter what her body looked like. He would not court her.

Colt sighed heavily. He made a promise to his father that he'd get to know her before turning her down. No time like the present.

She stood still just inside the door, her head moved slowly as if she was looking for someone. He was sure her mother had told her what Colt would be wearing tonight, so maybe introductions weren't really needed. Then again, this was a masquerade party. He really should pretend to be the charming midnight bandit, bent on stealing something from the young maiden, just as she would pretend to be Cleopatra.

When she saw him coming, she placed her hand on her chest, and her mouth dropped open. He stopped and bowed.

"Madame Cleopatra," he said in his best charming voice. Well... maybe it wasn't exactly his *best*.

She curtsied. "Sir Bandit."

"Although I'm not much of a dancer, would you care to join me for the next dance?" He offered his elbow.

She nodded, and the beads in her hair jangled. She slid her hand around his arm, and he took her to the middle of the barn where the other couples had gathered for the dance. When the fiddles began another tune, it was slower this time. Although he didn't know much about dancing, he did know how to waltz. He slipped one arm around her waist and held her other hand in his. They stepped in time with the fiddles.

His mind scrambled with topics that they could discuss, but for some reason, no words seemed to form in his mouth. The only thing he could think to say right now was, *you smell heavenly*. And she did. She smelled like wildflowers.

Colt cleared his throat. "So... what business is your family doing?"

"Well, as Pharaoh's daughter, I took over the Roman Empire after the death of my father. Unfortunately, my younger brother thought he should be ruler, and he started a civil war." She shook her head. "Brothers! They just can't handle an older sister getting everything."

As she spoke in an accent he wasn't familiar with – probably

Greek – he couldn't stop from grinning. Her cute sense of humor surprised him, but at least that made him a little more interested in getting to know her better. "Thankfully, I don't have to worry about younger siblings."

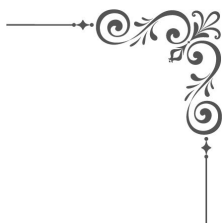
"Tell me, Sir Bandit," she continued speaking with the accent, "is your only love stealing from unsuspecting people, or are there other things you enjoy doing?"

Colt's grin stretched wider. He liked playing this pretend game. "As you can see, I enjoy hiding my identity, but mostly, I thrive on stealing... kisses from shy women."

Cleopatra laughed. "Forgive me, Sir Bandit, but wouldn't it be easier to woo a woman before kissing her? That way, you wouldn't have to steal anything."

He nodded, trying to appear heartbroken. "You are correct. However, where is the fun in that?"

She laughed again, and his heart tripped. It surprised him that hearing her laugh would make him feel giddy. And yet, Blaze's face still wouldn't leave his mind. Perhaps the only way to move on with his life – since he couldn't court his friend – would be to find another woman. His father would be happy to know that Colt had decided on Susan.



THREE

Blaze was living a dream.

Unfortunately, what happened this evening must remain a dream. But at least she was dancing in Colt's arms and flirting with him, as she'd always wanted to do. However, just like Cinderella, the dream would be over at midnight, and she would return to her role as his friend. Cleopatra would fade into the night, just as the Egyptian woman's history had done.

The dance ended before Blaze was ready for it to be over, and Colt walked her away from the middle of the barn with her hand still hooked around his elbow. She enjoyed the way he smiled at her, but she doubted he knew who she was. He would talk to her differently if he knew her real identity.

"I must admit," she continued in her fake accent, "that you dance very well for claiming to be not much of a dancer."

"It must be because of my dance partner."

"I'm quite sure it wasn't, because I know I have two left feet."

He chuckled. "And yet you fit into my arms perfectly."

Her heartbeat accelerated. It had been doing that since she saw him coming toward her. She had to dress this way only because she didn't want Colt to know who she was. After all, his childhood friend would never be seen in a gown that clung to her every curve in such an alluring fashion.

She swallowed hard, trying to add moisture to her dry mouth, but it didn't seem to be working the way she'd hoped. "Yes, dancing with you was quite nice."

“So, tell me... Madame Cleo.” He paused. “Is it all right if I call you that?”

She nodded. “You may. Shall I call you Bandit?”

“I’m actually partial to *Sir* Bandit.” He chuckled. “But my dear Madame Cleo, tell me something about yourself that I don’t already know.”

She nibbled on her bottom lip. How could she be truthful and yet still relate it to the historical figure that she represented?

“People of Egypt see me as a ruler, but they don’t know me at all. I hide behind a facade. I’m really not that strong-willed, and there are times I get very lonely. Many times, in fact.”

“I understand that very well.” He caressed her hand, still resting on his arm.

“People believe that I have many beaux, but my heart only belongs to one man.”

A ragged sigh came from him as he stepped closer. “I now wish my name was Mark Antony.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “Sir Bandit, would you find me brazen if I confessed that I think you are much better than Mark Antony?”

One of his eyebrows arched way above his mask. “I find brazen women very entertaining. But I do think you’re right. The Mark Antony I recall reading about convinced the women he loved to run away and kill themselves when times became hard.” He shook his head. “I’m not that kind of man. My whole life has been difficult to bear because I’m a wanted man.” He motioned to his mask. “Which is why I keep my face hidden. However, I love life. I believe if someone is unhappy, it’s because they have chosen that pathway. The road to happiness is finding what you love and doing all you can to obtain it.”

Her chest squeezed with uncertainty. Doing what he’d suggested was easier said than done. She would marry a stranger soon, but it was the choice she had to make in order to take care of the family who was trying to take care of her. Sadly, she couldn’t marry Colt because he didn’t believe in settling down.

“I couldn’t agree with you more.” She tried to keep her voice steady when it threatened to break.

Silence passed between them again, and she tried not to stare at him as if he was the most remarkable, handsome man in the world. And yet, looking at the people who were dancing just wasn’t holding her interest.

“Madame Cleo, would you like to dance with me again? Or...”

“Or?” She quickly encouraged him to continue his thought.

“Or would a stroll outside under the night’s garden of twinkling stars be more to your liking?”

She now understood what the historical women meant when they said they had *swooned*. “Some fresh air does sound good right now.”

He pulled her arm closer to his as he escorted her outside of the barn. The stars sprinkled the dark sky, making the moment more thrilling. She didn’t know how far to take this game, but she enjoyed it too much to end it now.

“Madame Cleo?” he asked once they were far enough away from the barn. “Is there anything about me that you’d like to know?”

Blaze wanted to laugh, but bit her bottom lip to keep it from bursting out of her mouth. What didn’t she know about him? She knew his favorite color – baby blue, the color of his eyes. His favorite food was fried fish. He liked to ride his horse and rope cattle... at least he had when he was younger.

“What do you do for a living?” After the words left her mouth, she wondered why she’d asked that. She already knew he didn’t want to work with his father.

He stared ahead of them as they walked, not saying anything. She wondered if she had upset him in some way. Perhaps she should apologize. Instead, she remained quiet to see what he’d say.

“Strange you should ask me that,” he said. “I’ve done so many things with my life, and I’ve liked them all. I grew up with a father who traveled all the time until my mother died. When he remarried...” He cleared his throat. “I went out on my own and learned new trades. So, to ask what I do for a living, the answer would be anything and everything.”

“What about now, here in Last Chance?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t been here long enough to know that yet. My father and his family are here, but I feel... out of place.” He patted her hand. “But don’t worry. I’m sure I’ll meet more charming people in town and feel differently next week.”

“I’m sure you will.” She paused then dared to ask one more question. “Do you... want to settle down some day?”

His chest shook with a silent laugh. “My father wants me to, but I’m not sure I’m ready for that yet. Maybe in time, but not now.”

Her chest tightened. She shouldn’t have asked. Knowing for

certain that he didn't want to marry hurt her more than guessing about what she wanted. She needed to stop pining for him. She would have a husband soon, and she could keep Colt as her friend.

"Well, Sir Bandit, I'm sure many women will want to be your friend, and maybe more."

Colt chuckled. "I wouldn't want to break anyone's heart. But as long as they don't mind being my friend, I'll be all right with that."

"Do you have many women friends?"

Colt led them into a grove of fruit trees. "I have one woman friend. She's amazing. I wouldn't trade what we have for the world."

Blaze's heart fluttered, and yet, sadness came over her. Yet, he didn't know she was Cleopatra. He wanted to steal a kiss, she was certain. However, she didn't want him to steal anything.

Colt stopped and took her into his arms. She gasped from the initial shock of standing so close and then nearly moaned with pleasure when he pressed against her. He cupped her face, and thankfully, her mask and wig stayed on. Warmth spread through her, turning her mind numb. She was definitely under his control.

"There's one more thing I'd like to know about you," she whispered.

"What is that?"

"I'd love to know how well you kiss."

Blaze shouldn't have said it. Kissing him would make her life miserable, knowing she'd never be able to enjoy it again after tonight. On the other hand, at least she'd be able to sample what she had only dreamed of doing.

He lowered his head. His mouth hovered above hers. "Now that, my lovely lady, I can show you."

Closing her eyes, she held her breath, waiting for the moment of contact. He brushed his lips over hers, teasing her. Their masks bumped together. He pulled back and yanked his mask from his face, and tossed it to the ground. As his mouth neared hers again, he lifted her mask, and it rested on her head. At first, she wanted to stop him, but then she realized they were in the shadows enough that he wouldn't be able to see her face clearly. Hopefully, she'd be able to remember to put it back on once they had finished kissing.

He took her in his arms again, one arm wrapping around her shoulders as the other circled her waist. She pressed her hands against his muscular chest. His mouth descended slowly. She was

too impatient and so lifted to meet him halfway.

The surprise was noted from his sudden intake, but then he took over as his mouth moved over hers passionately. For years, she had always wondered how it would feel to kiss him. It was nothing as she had imagined.

She met his lips and copied the way he kissed her. When he tilted his head to deepen the kiss, she accepted it. Although urgency ran rapidly through her, she still tried not to let her feelings take control. She didn't want him to think she'd been craving this since they'd first met ten years ago.

From a distance, floating through the breeze, someone called his name. No, her head screamed, not wanting this ecstasy to end. But she could tell he had heard it too, and he was slowly pulling away. She had no other choice but to end the wonderful moment he'd just given her. One that she'd cherish forever.

The moment they broke apart, she quickly lowered her mask. He bent and retrieved his. As he turned to see who was calling him, she noticed Lisa hurrying their way. Blaze groaned. She must leave now.

She pulled on Colt's arm, getting his attention. "I've got to get back to the barn before someone realizes I'm gone."

He nodded. "Meet me back inside."

"I will." She gave him a brief kiss before turning and leaving, quickening her steps so that Lisa wouldn't notice her.

"Colt," Lisa said out of breath. "I was told you came out here with Cleopatra."

Blaze hid behind a large oak, pressing her back against the bristly bark. Her heart still pounded out of control, but it was the tingling in her lips that worried her and made her sigh with happiness.

"Yes," Colt answered his Lisa, "but she just left to return to the party."

"Um... do you know who that was?"

"I'm assuming that was the girl you and my father wanted me to meet tonight."

"Oh, dear." Lisa groaned. "That wasn't Susan. She and her family just barely arrived."

Blaze gasped softly. Had he thought she was someone else?

"What?" Colt's voice lifted in irritation. "But my father told me to look for Cleopatra. That's what I did."

“Yes, but... who knew there would be two women with that costume?”

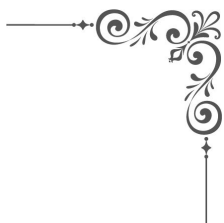
“Oh, I don’t know,” Colt replied sarcastically, “after all, this is a masquerade party.” He grumbled.

“Anyway, come back to the party, and I’ll introduce you to—”

“No.” Colt’s voice was stern. “I like the Cleopatra that I was with. I liked the way I felt when I was with her. Susan won’t measure up. Sorry, but I won’t meet her now.”

Tears filled Blaze’s eyes, and although it thrilled her to hear those words, it also broke her heart. Colt could never court her, and once he found out her true identity, he probably wouldn’t want to, anyway.

The only way to keep their friendship intact was to turn back into his friend. Unfortunately, it was midnight for Cinderella, and everything must return to normal. Sadly, her prince would never come to find Blaze. She wouldn’t let him.



FOUR

Colt twisted the forged wrench on the wagon wheel axle as he listened to his father telling the others in the barn of experiences he had gone through as a boy. Some of the stories he had heard before, but a few he hadn't. His mind drifted quite a bit which was normal. He hadn't been able to focus since the masquerade party four days ago.

It irritated him to think he had an incredible moment with Cleopatra and shared a perfect kiss, only to have her just disappear. She hadn't met him back in the barn as she'd promised. Instead, she'd disappeared, and the only other Cleopatra at the party was Susan, who he refused to meet.

He hadn't been dreaming that night because he could still feel her in his arms, and he could still taste the punch on her lips. They had danced so well and talked so easily, as if fate was trying to match them. Yet, if fate was at work, then why couldn't he find her?

Colt had ridden through town several times, looking for the angelic woman with black hair and a slender body. He would know her when he saw her. Yet, it hadn't happened.

Sighing, he rubbed his forehead and shifted on the stool. He tried to focus on tightening the wagon's axel and listening to his father's stories, but after two sentences, he hadn't heard a word.

Colt glanced at the others. Emma and Dakota had joined them in the barn today, and most of the morning they had complained about getting their dresses dirty. Teddy and Leroy were hard

workers, for which Colt was surprised and yet delighted that they hadn't relied on him to do everything. And Blaze...

Grinning, he rested his gaze on the tomboy, who would probably never change. Blaze would rather wear men's trousers and shirts than wear a pretty dress. However, her body had matured over the years, and the pants fit snug against her thighs and backside, and the man's shirt emphasized her womanly curves almost as much as a dress would.

It was a good thing other men weren't around to ogle her. Colt would have to step into the role as best friend and chastise the men if that were the case. Colt would not have men looking at Blaze as if she were a fine steed to be purchased. In fact... He tightened his fingers around the wrench and clenched his jaw. He'd make sure her mail-order groom respected Blaze before they exchanged their wedding vows.

She wore her hair in a ponytail, as usual, but for some reason, he rested his gaze on her slender neck. Blaze had the kind of neck Colt enjoyed brushing his lips across. And her heart-shaped mouth appeared perfect for kissing. Her big hazel eyes and long lashes would be tempting to gaze into while cuddling with her at night gazing at the stars.

What am I doing? Colt shook the improper thoughts out of his head. This was ridiculous. He was supposed to be daydreaming about Cleopatra, not his best friend.

She would make her soon-to-be husband a fine wife. She was fun to be around. Blaze made Colt laugh more times than he could count.

She paused from filing the wagon wheel and looked up at his father. Whatever his father had said made everyone laugh, but all Colt could hear was Blaze's laughter. He smiled. He'd always enjoyed making her laugh. He really liked hearing the light flutter to her laugh...

His mind paused as another memory popped into his head. Cleopatra had the same kind of laugh that lifted at the end.

Colt sat up straighter in his chair. Cleopatra's body was warm and cuddly in his arms, just as Blaze's had been the other day when that rude woman bumped into her. Blaze's lips were the same shape as Cleopatra's. What were the odds that he'd found his dream woman from the other night?

Blaze would have attended the party that night with Lisa's

family. After he had returned home that night, Blaze hadn't been there. What were the odds that she had dressed as Cleopatra, too?

Excitement pumped through his heart as he fit the pieces of the puzzle together. But he had to test her in some way to see if his Cleopatra and his good friend were the same person.

He returned to the axle, but he still glanced her way often. Her focus was on her wagon wheel, which was all right. That gave him time to plan out how he could get her to confess. Perhaps he'd invite her to go for a ride with him later today. Then again, he couldn't make it appear as if he was purposely trying to get her alone, which meant they'd have to go riding with her cousins.

He grumbled to himself. That wouldn't work.

Perhaps the only way was to accidentally run into her when she was alone. That way, it wouldn't appear to be contrived. She trusted him, and he didn't want to do anything to jeopardize that. However, maybe he could convince her to give him another kiss...

He grinned. Now that sounded like a good plan.



BLAZE RODE HER HORSE through the countryside, thrilling in the feel of the wind on her face and her hair whipping behind her. She had taken her hair out of the ponytail, mainly to feel the freedom from the restricted tie. In times like this, she could breathe easier and remove life's worries from her mind. She loved riding. She always had.

However, today she had so much on her mind that she would scream if she couldn't wade through her thoughts in private. She'd been treading carefully around Colt since the kiss at the masquerade party four days ago, but today, as she worked in the barn, a different atmosphere hung around them. As she repaired the wagon wheel, she felt as if Colt was looking at her, but his focus was on fixing the axle when she glanced his way. Yet, he had a grin on his face every time she looked at him.

Was he really watching, or was she just feeling guilty?

Once the excitement had worn off after she'd left the masquerade party, she had cried herself to sleep that night. Kissing him had been the worst idea she had ever had. And she was paying dearly for it. Night and day, Colt Masterson was all she could think about. Every time she'd talked to him since that night, she found it awkward. It was hard to pretend to be herself without gazing

dreamily at his mouth and wishing he was kissing her again.

Something had to be done, and soon. She couldn't live this way.

She slowed her horse as she neared the stream. It had been some time since she was carefree enough to kick off her boots and stockings and wade through the water. Dare she do that now? They were caught up with repairs in the barn today, which was why she was able to take this much-needed break in the day. Nobody was expecting her back anytime soon, so... she may as well make the best of a warm, lazy afternoon.

Pulling on the reins, she stopped her horse. She jumped down and led her horse to the water to drink. After hooking the reins around a tree limb, she sat on the bank and proceeded to remove her boots.

Not far away, she heard another horse's neigh. Swinging around, she searched the clearing on the other side of the trees. When she saw the unexpected visitor, she groaned. The beating of her heart thudded excitedly against her ribs. Although she loved Colt, seeing him now would just make her jumpier. Yet telling him to leave her alone would make him curious. She couldn't have that.

She turned her back toward him as she looked at her stocking feet. She'd never been afraid to go wading with him around before. It was that kiss! Why did it have to ruin everything?

"Blaze," he exclaimed cheerfully, walking toward her. "I'm surprised to see you here."

She glanced over her shoulder at him, watching him tether his horse to a tree before coming her way. "Why? You know how much I like to ride."

"Exactly." He said beside her. "You like to ride. I enjoy relaxing by the stream." He winked. "Which is why I'm surprised to see you by the stream."

His gaze penetrated deep into her eyes. She couldn't remember him ever looking at her *that* way... as if he knew a secret about her. She gulped. Hopefully, he didn't know the secret she was hiding from him now.

She shrugged. "I like hearing the water gurgling over the rocks. It's soothing."

He pointed to her stocking feet. "And you're going wading too. Can I join you?"

"Uh, sure. Why not? I always look forward to your company." The old Blaze wouldn't have paused before inviting him to join her,

but the new Blaze had been kissed good and hard and would never forget the feelings of joy rushing through her while in Colt's arms.

"Thank you." He grinned. "I'm glad you find my presence more entertaining than being alone."

Why had he said it *that* way? Something was definitely wrong. "But of course." She bumped her arm against his.

They exchanged glances as she finished removing her stockings, and he took off his boots and socks. For a few seconds, the air between them seemed to sizzle, and the silence became awkward. Her nerves jumped with anticipation, and yet she knew nothing was going to happen between them. So then why did he keep looking at her that way?

"Colt," she said warily, "you're starting to worry me."

"Why?"

"Because of the way you are staring at me."

His expression relaxed as he reached over and grasped a lock of hair resting on her shoulder. Her heartbeat sped up that much more.

"I haven't seen you with your hair down since I arrived in Last Chance."

Inwardly, she groaned. She had gone riding, not thinking she would see anyone, which was why she took it out of the ponytail.

She laughed awkwardly. "Oh, yes. I suppose I did take my hair down."

"I like it."

If her heart didn't slow down, she would have a heart attack, she just knew it. "Thank you."

She waited for him to release her hair, but he didn't. Instead, he stroked it gently. Good grief! It was just hair. So then, why was it melting her heart?

"You should wear it this way all the time," he added.

"Are you kidding?" She shook her hair, releasing his hold. "How am I to work in the barn with my hair in my face all the time?"

"True, but... you look very much like a woman with your hair down."

She really wished he wouldn't notice that about her. He needed to find women that didn't mind if he up and left after a couple of months of wooing them. "Well, maybe after I'm married, I'll wear it down."

He sighed and leaned back on his elbows, gazing at the stream

not far in front of them. "That's why I need to talk to you."

"What? You came riding to look for me?"

"I did. Is that all right?"

"Yes, but why?"

"Blaze, since you told me that you were going to marry a stranger you met through a newspaper ad, I haven't felt good about that."

She snorted a light laugh. "You haven't felt *good*? Colt, I'm the one marrying this man, not you."

He threw her a side-ways grin. "I know, but you're my friend, and I care about you."

"So, what worries you?" she wondered, leaning back to rest on her elbows like he was doing.

"I'm worried that this man might not make a good husband."

It was almost comical to see Colt acting this way toward her. He wouldn't make a good husband, yet he didn't think her mail-order groom would, either? "Why do you say that?"

She stared into his gorgeous blue eyes, wondering why he wasn't saying anything. It almost seemed as if he was content to just stare at her, which was odd for him. Finally, a smile tugged on his lips, and he cupped the side of her face.

"Blaze, you deserve the perfect man. I don't want to see you enter another loveless marriage."

She arched an eyebrow. "*Another* loveless marriage?"

He nodded. "Didn't you tell me you hardly knew your first husband?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Can you honestly tell me you were in love with him?"

She should have realized that he could still read her, even after all this time apart. "I... liked him. I think I could have loved him."

"Don't you want to marry a man who you love?"

If she told him her true feelings, she'd scare him off. But telling him wouldn't change a thing, so she'd keep her mouth closed.

She pulled away from him and stood, moving toward the water. "You don't understand, Colt. With George getting weaker by the day, I need to find a husband soon. My husband will help us keep the shop afloat."

"What?"

Colt's high-pitch reply worried her, but she didn't turn to look at him. She figured he would come to join her in the water, anyway. It

only took a few more seconds before he was beside her, sticking a bare foot in the water.

“Are you telling me,” he continued, “that you found a husband who knows how to repair wagons?”

“Yes.” She carefully stepped into the cold water. It felt refreshing against her warm feet. “When I had the advertisement written up, I made sure the man knew what was expected of him once he arrived.”

Blowing out a gush of air from his mouth, Colt pushed his fingers through his hair. “That’s unheard of, Blaze.”

“Not in Last Chance. Most of the women in this town had to resort to doing the very thing I have done to find a husband and help us here.”

He shuffled through the water and stood directly in front of her, grasping her arms. “Blaze, do you hear what you’re saying?”

“I do, yes.”

“You really want to enter a marriage without knowing if you are going to love the man?”

“That’s what I have to do, Colt.” She touched his chest. Once her palm rested against his shirt, she realized why she shouldn’t have done that. How could it have slipped her mind, how muscular he was?

They stared at each other for several unnerving seconds without speaking. His chest rose and fell quickly as if he’d been running a race, but it was the sadness in his eyes that tugged on her heartstrings. If only... No, she mustn’t think that way.

“Will you do me a favor before you marry this man?” he asked.

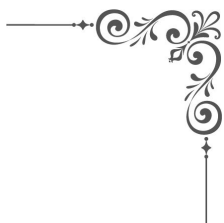
She swallowed hard, trying to moisten her suddenly dry throat. “What is that?”

“Let me check him out first. When he arrives, wait a few days so that I can see what kind of man he is. A life without love is no life at all, and you deserve better, Blaze.”

She wanted to laugh but refrained. He wasn’t serious, was he? But the way he looked at her let her know that he was dead serious – and the crazy beating of her heart also let her know that this was something she just might consider.

She’d be a fool for saying yes. But once again, she was tired of being lonely. Although he wanted to help her find love, he was only doing it as a friend. In the end, she’d get her hopes up, that he’d want to marry her, which wouldn’t happen. Why was she going to

agree to his insane idea?



FIVE

Blaze inhaled steadily and calmly as she stared at Colt. Her mind wanted to turn him down, but her heart told her to *let him*. She swallowed hard. “I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Colt, but really I don’t –”

“Shh.” He put his finger to her lips, stopping her. “Don’t turn me down. You need me. You know you need me.” His smile widened. “I know you know you need me.”

Her breathing turned ragged again, and with an unsteady hand, she moved away from his touch, but he clasped her hand and held on to her fingers.

“How exactly will you see if he’s the right man for me?”

“I know you, Blaze. I know what you like to do and what you don’t like. I’ll see if he enjoys the same things you do. I’ll especially see if he’s going to treat you well. If not, I’m sending him back where he came from.”

How she had missed him being her friend before she married the first time. If Colt was around, he could have seen that Lawrence wasn’t the man for her, but she’d married him anyway, because he was the only man who asked for her hand. She had been as desperate as Lawrence was.

“Well, I suppose I could have you meet him and get to know him a little.”

Colt’s smile widened. “I’ll do more than that. I’ll treat him like a brother. Maybe then he’ll let his guard down enough for me to see if he has a kind heart.”

“Colt?” she asked softly, running her hand up his arm slowly. “Why are you doing this?”

He gasped. “Are you kidding me? I’m your friend.”

“Yes, but you haven’t been my friend for a long time.”

His smile disappeared. “I know, and I’m sorry. I wasn’t leaving you as much as I was leaving my father and his new family.”

“I know, Colt.” Her chest tightened. “But a lot of time has passed. I’m surprised you still think of me like that.”

He shrugged. “I’ve always been able to talk to you, Blaze. I need that, especially now as I help my father and the wainwright shop.”

“How long are you planning on staying in Last Chance?”

He stepped away from her, looking down at the water. He didn’t have to say anything. His actions told Blaze what she needed to know.

“I have to be here for a year.”

“What? You *have* to?”

He looked up at her. The light in his eyes was gone. “Yes. My grandfather is paying me to stay and help my father for a year.”

She didn’t enjoy the clenching of her chest or the feeling that she’d just been punched in the stomach. He only came here for money? Perhaps Colt Masterson wasn’t the man she wanted him to be after all.

“Well, once I’m married, you won’t have to stay long. My new husband will be very helpful, and you can be on your way. We don’t want you here if you’re being forced.” She took an uneasy breath. “Believe me, it’s not a fun life to be forced to do something you don’t want to do.”

She turned and stepped out of the stream. She collected her stockings and boots but didn’t put them on. Instead, she quickly mounted her horse and rode off toward home, blinking away the tears filling her eyes.



COLT SHOULDN’T HAVE told Blaze about the money. Nobody would understand why he did what he did. How could he explain that he only did this because all of his life, his grandfather had convinced Colt that he’d never make a good grandson – good enough to get an inheritance, anyway?

It crushed him to realize he’d upset her so much. He needed to bring that beautiful smile back to her face soon and make her feel

that she was important to him.

The next morning while Colt was rebuilding a wagon, his mind churned with ideas of how he could bring light back into her eyes and laughter back to her expression. Ten years ago, he would create games that challenged both her – and him – which included some of the other youth their age. Of course, usually, only the boys played along. Still, it made her happy to compete. He hoped she was still competitive now, as she'd been before.

At lunchtime, he sat on a tree stump in front of the barn as he ate a sandwich. In the field across from his father's land, a group of kids who looked to be between the ages of ten and sixteen, played kickball, but they appeared bored. Traveling so much, Colt had learned many fun games over the years. Perhaps he should show them some. After all, he would be in this town for at least a year, so he should try and get people to like him.

He quickly finished his last bite and hurried inside the barn. Lisa and George were at the house, but Blaze and her cousins were all working on something. Dakota and Emma were painting some boards, and Teddy and Leroy were arguing about something. Blaze was the only person who enjoyed what she did. Of course, Colt wondered if she would like married life better. He was sure she'd make a good mother.

"Who in here is ready to take a break?" All heads snapped up and gazes locked on him. He grinned and motioned toward the field across from the barn. "I see some kids playing, and they look bored. I think we could help them liven things up. What do you say?"

The boys were the first to jump to their feet, and the girls soon followed, even though Blaze took her time.

"Do you think we should be playing games, Colt?"

He nodded. "We need a break from time to time. If not, we'll get worn out from work too quickly. Besides, there is more to life than working ourselves to death. Am I right?"

She smiled. "Yes, I suppose."

Colt motioned to her with his hand. "Come on, then."

He waited for Blaze to reach his side, but by the time they crossed to the next field, the others had already greeted the kids. After they all made their introductions, Colt told everyone that he'd learned a fun game while living in New York for a couple of years.

Colt walked to the ball the kids had been kicking around and picked it up. He tested its firmness for the game he had in mind.

"I know a game that is not only fun, but it challenges us to be stronger and quicker. The game is called dodgeball. One player will have the ball and throw it at the others. It's our duty to *dodge* the ball and not let it hit us. If we are hit, then we are the ones doing the throwing."

Teddy nodded excitedly. "I've played this before. It's fun."

"Who will start the game?" one of the other kids asked.

Colt grinned. "I will since I suggested it."

It surprised Colt to see the difference a game made on Lisa's kids. Even Blaze seemed to smile more. He really enjoyed hearing her laugh, too. It eased his heart and mind seeing her this way as they all played the game. Turmoil had been building up inside him since the day Blaze picked him up from the stagecoach.

Why did he have to think about her *that* way? But more importantly, why had she dressed so alluring the night of the doctor's masquerade party? And... why did she kiss him? The more he thought back to that amazing night, he recalled that she was the instigator. Even though he wanted to kiss Cleopatra, she was the one who urged him to do it first. That told him what he needed to know. She felt the same way about him.

Now he wondered how long it had been since she'd thought of him as more than a friend. And now that he knew, it would be impossible just to ignore his feelings.

As he thought about all the things they had done together, she was the one he had more fun with. She was the one who'd made him laugh. Blaze was the one he went out of his way for. He'd loved her as his best friend because he knew they could never be anything more.

But now... The kiss had changed everything.

As the game progressed, he didn't have time to think about the growing attraction he had for his best friend. Instead, he concentrated on throwing the ball. At first, he purposely missed his targets, only because he liked being in control and watching Blaze's hazel eyes sparkle when she laughed.

Finally, he was able to get Teddy out. It didn't take long for Teddy to get Emma out. After five more games, the group was tired and needed a short rest. They all walked to the water-well that wasn't too far away and drank as if they'd been walking for miles in the hot wilderness.

Blaze leaned against the well, sitting on the ground. He plopped

down beside her. Blaze's face was damp, but he thought she still looked pretty. Her cheeks were flushed from the heat, and there was a spark in her eyes whenever she looked his way.

His breathing was still fast due to the exertion he'd put his body through, and yet, the frustration building up inside him still hadn't lessened.

"So tell me," she said, out of breath, "why did you need this activity today? Did something happen between you and your father that upset you?"

Sighing, he relaxed against the well, keeping his gaze on her. "It seems I've been having hard days since coming here."

Her forehead creased. "Really, Colt. You need to work things out with your father. He's not going to live forever, and you'll feel guilty if he dies without you clearing your troubles with him."

"Maybe that is what worries me. I don't like seeing him this way. I don't want him to die, and it's hard to get focused on work again."

She patted his arm. "Let me know if I can do anything to help you out."

He liked it when she touched him, and his heartbeat fluttered wildly. "No. I'm not so heartless to add more work to your already heavy load. I know how my father piles work on to you."

She laughed. "I can handle your father and all of the extra duties he gives me."

He frowned. "Blaze, you don't have to always act tough. Sometimes it's good to let the tender woman inside you come out and get a taste of the real world."

"Colt," she said, laying her hand on his knee. "I know it's been many years since we have done things together, but I assure you, I'm not tough all the time."

"I have yet to see that." He placed his hand over hers, holding it to his knee, mainly because he liked the crazy rhythm of his heart whenever she touched him, and he liked the warmth flowing through him. "Because if you showed it more, I'm sure you'd have guys lined up for miles, waiting to court you."

She released a boisterous laugh. "Have you been drinking spirits this afternoon? Because I will never have men lined up to get to know me."

"They would be stupid not to. All they have to do is gaze deeply into your eyes and spend one evening with you, and they'll be

madly in love.” Slowly, he ran his focus over her eyes, her perky nose, and soft chin, but especially to her luscious lips. “You’re a hard woman to resist, Blaze Murphy.”

After he’d said the words, he mentally kicked himself. Why had he said that? Couldn’t he control his thoughts any better than that?

“And you are a hard man to resist,” she said softly.

His gaze jumped up and met her wide eyes. Her cute grin stretched wider, and she pulled her hand away and playfully slugged him in the shoulder.

“Especially when you want to play dodgeball, and I enjoy beating you.” She stood and brushed her palms against her trouser legs. “What do you say to a few more games?”

“You don’t have to ask me twice. Nobody beats me in dodgeball and brags about it.”

The group got together again, and the next game they played wasn’t serious at all. They laughed and teased each other. He liked seeing Blaze this way. Then again, he liked her when she was passionate, too.

The last game they played, she seemed more determined. More serious. Which, of course, made him more serious. It wasn’t that he wanted to win. He didn’t care about the game. But he poured all his frustrations out, throwing the ball hard but missing Blaze every time. He fell quite a few times. So did she. But neither of them let that stop the game. Instead, they laughed and jumped back up, ready to continue.

As the game finished, Colt and Blaze collapsed on the ground under a tree. The others around them darted toward the stream down the slope. He watched her and realized her ragged breathing matched his. They lay still for several minutes. All Colt had the strength for was to look up at the leaves in the tree, shading them as he waited for his body to cool. He was physically drained, and yet this was one of the best times he’d ever had with Blaze.

Rolling his head to the side, he looked over at her again. She had her eyes closed. He hadn’t realized how near she was. If he stretched out his arm, he’d touch her. As if on cue, she looked his way.

“Are you still alive?” he asked, out of breath.

She smiled weakly. “Barely.”

“I’m thinking,” he said, still feeling drained, “that we need to call your cousins back over here and have them drag us back to the

barn.”

Her chest shook from a laugh, but the sound didn't exit her body. “Yes. I'm good with that.”

They stared at each other in silence for a few more minutes. Finally, Colt's body cooled down, and his heartbeat returned to normal. But with it brought the frustration he'd had, which was the reason he wanted to play dodgeball in the first place.

“So...” He swallowed to help with his dry throat. “Other than feeling exhausted, did you enjoy the game?”

“I did. Do you feel better now?”

He laughed. “Not really. In fact, I probably feel worse.”

She rolled to her side and propped up on her elbow. “Colt, what's wrong? You can talk to me, you know. I'm a great listener.”

He found the strength to roll toward her and prop up on his elbow, opposite from her. Their faces were closer than before. He didn't know how his heart could soften anymore, but most women he had courted didn't have her kindness.

“No, Blaze. I'm not ready to talk about it. How about you?”

“Me?”

“Yes. Are you going to tell me what's been bothering you lately?”

“Nothing has been bothering me.”

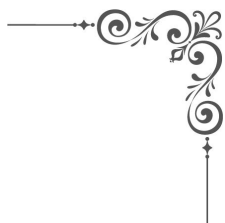
He tsked and shook his head. “That's not entirely true, or you wouldn't have come to play the game.” He reached over and touched her hand. “You were playing like you were frustrated about something, too.”

“Colt, it's nothing, I promise.”

She made a move to stand, but he yanked on her arm, and she fell against him. Immediately, his arm slipped around her waist, holding her in place. Her breathing had sped up again, but then so had his. This time, when she gazed deeply into his eyes, he could see her inner turmoil. Remarkably enough, it matched his feelings.

“Talk to me, Blaze,” he whispered as he dropped his gaze to her tempting mouth... hoping this would be the moment when she kissed him.

She inhaled sharply and her lips parted. The beat of his heart took on a different rhythm, slamming against his chest as excitement shot through him. He took her gesture as an invitation, and he would certainly follow through.



SIX

There was more than one reason why Blaze couldn't breathe, and right now, it had nothing to do with the intense game she'd played. Being in this position with Colt on the ground was surprisingly comfortable, and yet, any of her cousins could leave the stream and see her with Colt. That would start rumors which might result in her losing her mail-order husband.

But, she could kiss Colt right now, and for some reason, she felt he wouldn't reject her show of affection. She'd have to wonder about *why* he acted this way, but that would be later.

The wild beat of her heart encouraged her to make the first move. Unfortunately, she couldn't kiss him. Not ever again.

So why wouldn't her heart stop this infatuation she had with him? And why wouldn't her body pull away at this moment? He was leaning up, and if she didn't do something soon, they would be in a *very* heated kiss.

"Colt," she whispered tightly. "I think we should get back to the shop. Mr. Whitaker will be by to get his wagon by seven o'clock tonight.

His expression fell, as did his arms. She pulled away, wishing she wouldn't feel this way about him.

"You're right." He climbed to his feet and then reached to pull her up. "Do you want to go to the stream first? I know I need to splash some water on my face."

She nodded and stood. "Yes, that does sound good."

In silence, they walked toward the water. As they neared, Blaze

heard the flitter of laughter. The others had started a water fight. Colt chuckled and hurried to join in. Her heart swelled to see him like this. It wasn't that he was immature. Instead, she could tell that he enjoyed teasing others. Or, was this a way of showing her that he would make a good father someday? She dared not trust her instincts on that matter.

As she neared the stream, her cousins splashed water on her. She laughed and joined in the fun. Although Mr. Whitaker's wagon needed to get finished, a few more minutes to play wouldn't hurt. And the cool water would refresh all of them from their vigorous game earlier.

Before she knew what was happening, Colt ran toward her, wrapped his arms around her, and lifted her against him as he carried her further into the water.

She playfully screamed but loved every second with Colt. He was so much more a man now than he'd been ten years ago. Knowing the difference now was what her problem had been since he arrived in Last Chance. Yet, maybe it didn't matter since she had been in love with him when she was young, too.

"Put me down, Masterson," she told him as laughter laced her voice.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll put you down nice and easy." His mischievous grin widened as he slid an arm under her legs to cradle her.

Gasping, she threw her arms around his neck, holding on securely so he wouldn't drop her. She was mesmerized by his smoldering blue eyes. Being like this with him made her breathless.

She shouldn't enjoy this feeling too much. It wouldn't be fair to her soon-to-be husband if she compared him to Colt all the time.

He bent, and the moment her backside touched the water, she laughed harder and wiggled to get free. Colt's tight grip wouldn't loosen as he placed her on the ground. The water only rose to her waist, but she didn't mind at all. In fact, she would like some company.

Clutching onto his arms, she yanked him down. Because of his awkward position, he had no other choice but to land in the water beside her. His laughter grew as he took her back into his arms, pressing his wet shirt against her.

The others jumped in the water with them. Blaze's face hurt from smiling so much. But Colt had been correct this time. They all

needed this break in the day, and she wouldn't feel guilty for enjoying herself with Colt.

However, tomorrow the guilt would come. She was sure of it.



TIME HAD SLIPPED BY too quickly, and now, Colt knew it was too late. Blaze would meet her mail-order groom today, and Colt's father had him running the wainwright shop in order to give Blaze the space she needed to get to know the stranger who would marry her.

Colt's gut twisted, making him pound the hammer against the wagon wheel harder. For a whole week, he'd tried to spend more time with Blaze, but more times than he wanted to count, her cousins had been around, not giving Colt any privacy. Yet, what good was privacy when he didn't know his own mind? There was a strong attraction between him and Blaze, and the question was – did he want to do anything about it?

Although the kiss had happened because he thought Cleopatra was someone else, that night had left a lasting impression and weighed heavily on his chest. He had loved Blaze from ten years ago, but was he *in love* with her now? Even if he was, did he really want to do anything about it? After all, in one year, he'd be long gone from this town.

Groaning, he paused in his hammering long enough to swipe the cuff of his sleeve across his moist forehead. Today was another very warm day. However, playing in the stream was out of the question.

Dakota darted past him and toward the front of the barn. Colt lifted his gaze to see what the young blonde woman was doing. She rushed out of the front doors but then came to a sudden stop. Immediately following in her sister's trail ran Emma and stopped beside her. The two sisters giggled and clutched each other's hands while looking up the street.

Colt straightened and glanced at the girls' brothers. They had both stopped working and were watching their sisters.

"What's going on?" Colt wondered.

"I think they are trying to see if the stagecoach has come yet. We are all very excited to meet Blaze's new husband."

"They're not married yet." Grumbling, Colt returned to his hammering, but now he was anxious to meet the other man who may melt Blaze's heart – or break it.

He threw the hammer down and stood. Apparently, he couldn't concentrate on his work until he saw the other man, too.

Trying to walk calmly, he soon joined the sisters who stood near the road, looking down the street toward the stagecoach station. He couldn't see much from this far away. Part of him wanted to get a horse and ride closer, just to get a better view.

"Which one is she?" he asked the sisters.

"I can't really see," Dakota said, "but she's wearing a white blouse and green skirt."

He squinted, trying to see better from this distance, but he was still out of luck.

"Should we walk closer?"

Teddy's voice from behind Colt made him jump. When did they come out of the barn?

"No, we will stay right here." Colt turned and gently pushed his stepbrothers back toward the barn. "Come on, you twittering half-wits," Colt said to the sisters, "get inside so that we can finish our work. The sooner we're done, the sooner we can meet Blaze's new beau."

His words must have encouraged the siblings because they returned to their duties and worked faster than Colt had seen them do so far since he'd been here. Yet, he also realized he was working extra fast, as well.

The hours seemed to drag after that, but soon, the sisters finished their painting and ran toward the house. Not long after, the brothers hurried out of the barn, heading for the house. Colt should stop, too. Yet, he didn't want to meet the man Blaze would marry because then everything would become too real. He didn't know how well he'd be able to handle that.

Once he was finished with the wagon wheel, he shut the doors to the barn and hung up the *closed* sign. Running his fingers through his hair, he groaned. He needed a bath. He wanted to look his best before meeting Blaze's beau.

A week ago, when he arrived, he had decided to stay in the bedroom in the back of the barn. He didn't want to hear the step-siblings arguing in the house. Taking his meals with them and having them in the barn wore on his nerves enough.

It didn't take long to fill the hip tub with water and thoroughly wash himself. As he bathed, he tried to listen for joyous voices coming from the house as the family got to know the new man in

their lives, but he couldn't. His gut twisted again, wondering if he would be able to handle this at all.

Colt dried himself off and quickly dressed. He took the comb and pulled it through his wet, tangled hair. He would meet this new man and do what he told Blaze he'd do for her. Colt would make sure this man wasn't going to break her heart. Although Colt wasn't ready to settle down yet, he would at least see that his best friend was happy in her new marriage.

Taking a few moments to gain courage, he looked at his reflection in the mirror. Sadness etched in his eyes. He needed to put on a fake smile and try to do his best even if his heart wasn't in it.

He left his room and turned to head to the barn's back door, but a sound from the main workroom caught his attention. Nobody was supposed to be here. Scowling, Colt marched toward the intruder. He wouldn't let anyone take advantage of his father's shop.

The lantern on the table was lit low, and he definitely remembered turning it off. Then taking cautious steps, he moved into the workroom, glancing around the room, ready to catch the miscreant.

Standing at the window with her back toward him was a lady dressed in a white blouse and matching hat, wearing a green skirt. Colt sucked in a quick breath. What was Blaze doing here?

He stepped closer to her. "Blaze, honey? Why aren't you at the house with your beau?"

From where he stood, he noticed when she took a shaky breath from the way her shoulders shook when they lifted and fell. After a few seconds, she turned to face him. Her eyes were red and swollen from her tears.

"Blaze," he gasped and rushed to her, taking her in his arms. "What happened?"

Her body trembled slightly. "He... didn't come."

"What?" He withdrew just enough to peer down at her face. "He didn't come on the stagecoach?"

She shook her head. "The stagecoach arrived, but he was not on it." She swallowed noisily. "He... he... he didn't want to marry me, I suppose."

"Then he's a fool." Anger rose inside him, making him want to find the stupid man and shake some sense into him.

"No." She took an uneven breath again. "He probably came

earlier than planned and was able to get a good look at me.” She licked her lips. “And he probably realized he didn’t want a tomboy for a wife.”

“Oh, my dearest Blaze.” He cupped the side of her face as he stroked his thumb gently along her cheek, moist from her tears. “It doesn’t matter if you like to wear men’s clothes or play dodgeball with a group of kids. You are far from being a tomboy. You’re as gentle as any woman I’ve been with, and you have such a caring heart. And...” He moved his gaze over her face and up to her hat before removing it. “You’re the prettiest woman I know.”

More tears filled her eyes, and she smiled, even if it wasn’t full. “Colt Masterson, you are a cad.”

“What?” He hiccupped a laugh. “Why am I a cad?”

“Because you say the sweetest things. I needed to hear those words, but... You are my friend. It’s not the same.”

He shook his head. “I’m still a man even though I’m your friend.” He took a step back and slid his gaze over her pretty blouse, thin waist, and slender hips. “And I think you are one gorgeous woman.”

“Colt? My eyes are up here.”

He snapped out of the daze her new look had put him under. Blinking, he lifted his gaze to her eyes. Even in the shadows, he knew the color of her hazel eyes and the way he couldn’t stop dreaming about them. Her long lashes brushed on her skin when she blinked. And her mouth... Inwardly, he groaned. The smooth raspberry color of her lips made him want to kiss her to see if they tasted as good as they looked.

“Colt? Are you all right?”

He was definitely *not* all right. Her beauty had numbed his brain, and he couldn’t think of anything to say. In fact, he was probably drooling like a boy the first time he ever had lovey-dovey feelings, but he didn’t care.

She cupped his face and tilted his head until their gazes met again. She gave him a teasing grin.

“I’m still the same person, so quit looking at me as if I’m Medusa.”

He chuckled lightly as he slid his arms around her perfect waist and pulled her closer. “No, Blaze. You’re not Medusa. I will not turn to stone by gazing upon your loveliness. I think you’re a goddess.”

Her teasing expression disappeared, and something more serious

replaced it. Her slender throat jumped as if she'd taken a hard swallow and her hands dropped to his shoulders.

"Colt, you shouldn't say things like that to a woman who rarely hears compliments that make her feel pretty."

He lifted a hand to her hair and rubbed a lock between his fingers and thumb. It was as silky as it looked, even if it was wrapped in a small bun. "Forgive me." He leaned closer, pressing his cheek against hers and enjoying the softness of her skin and her heavenly fragrance of wildflowers... the same scent that his Cleopatra had that night of the doctor's party.

"Forgive you?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"Yes, for not saying it to you more often." He brushed his mouth across her cheek. "I should have told you every time we were together."

He turned them, pushing her up against the wall for support. Her body trembled, but her ragged breathing let him know she was enjoying this. He kissed her cheek and then placed another kiss on her neck. A small moan released from her throat as she tightened her fingers on his shoulders.

"Colt," her voice squeaked. "We shouldn't be doing this."

"I know, but... I can't pull away. If you want me to stop, you're going to have to tell me." He kissed her chin, getting closer to her mouth as his heartbeat pounded wildly.

"Colt," she whispered huskily, "I... can't stop you."

He lightly swept his lips over hers, and she sighed heavily as her body melted against him. Happiness swelled in his chest, and he captured her mouth with his. He started the kiss out gentle at first, but he was losing control fast as the excitement built inside him. Her mouth fit perfectly with his, reminding him so much of Cleopatra's kiss. The woman at the masquerade party and the one in his arms were definitely the same person. Knowing this only made him want Blaze that much more.

He deepened the kiss, tightening his arms around her, pressing his body against her closer. She clung to him and answered him back with passionate kisses. Never in his life had he kissed a woman with so much emotion, making each second count as the best he'd ever had.

Finally, her hands moved, sliding to his neck, and then her fingers threaded through his hair. Warmth spread all over his body. But the feeling was more than that. It was as if he knew her feelings

for him with every stroke of her fingers and from every touch. This was the first time he'd felt the jolt of love shoot through his heart.

"Oh, Blaze," he sighed, moving his mouth across her cheek again and down her neck. She tilted her head back, giving him more access. "This is so... wonderful. *You* are so wonderful."

"But Colt," she said in a voice lower than before, "I haven't changed. I'm the same woman underneath this dress and styled hair."

He pulled back enough to look at her. Passion was etched on her face and especially in her dreamy eyes. "I know. That's what makes this thing between us so much better."

Smiling, he caressed her cheek. "There's something else I must confess."

"What?"

"I've wanted this since we first kissed as Cleopatra and the bandit."

She sucked in a breath, and her eyes widened. "How did you know it was me?"

He grinned. "I didn't fully know until just now."

"And you're not mad at me?"

"Of course not." He kissed her forehead. "You'd be shocked to hear just how much I've been thinking of our kiss and wanting to do this again."

Tears sprang to her eyes again. This time when she smiled, it was full. Slowly, she slid her hands down his chest. "You don't know how long I've waited to hear those words."

"How long?" He moved his hand slowly down her neck.

"Since we first met."

Surprised, he pulled back slightly. "For ten years? Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"I enjoyed being your friend, and because... I didn't think you could ever feel the same way about me." She shrugged. "Besides that, I knew you couldn't settle down in one place, and that's the kind of man I'm looking for."

Colt's thoughts came to a screeching halt. How had that slipped his mind? She was right. He would leave Last Chance in a year. He couldn't commit to a woman, not when he was a wanderer.

Groaning, he rested his forehead against her neck. On his temple, he felt her erratic pulse. Why had he forgotten about those things he wanted out of life? Even if she kissed like an angel, and

he would always love her as his friend, he could never marry her.

Could he wipe out everything that has happened between them? How could he work in the barn every day and see her sitting working on a wagon without wanting to hold her and kiss her sweet lips?

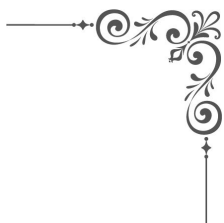
“Oh, Blaze.” His heart broke. “I can’t believe... I lost my head.” He took a deep breath. “I’ve been so selfish that I haven’t considered the consequences of our actions.”

She kissed his head. “This isn’t your fault, it’s mine. I went to the masquerade party, hoping you wouldn’t recognize my disguise because I wanted you to see me and desire me as a woman.”

He lifted his head and looked into her tear-filled eyes. His heart wrenched. “And now that I have these feelings, I won’t be able to just turn them off. I want you, Blaze, more than I’ve wanted anybody before.”

A tear streaked down her face. “But you don’t want me enough to settle down, do you?”

His chest tightened more as frustration built inside of him, making him want to scream. “For now, we’ll go back to being friends. That’s all I can promise for now.”



SEVEN

There was no way Blaze could work with Colt today, even though that was the only thing that would take her mind off her woes. Last night's declaration from him had been what she'd dreamed about since she first realized she was in love with him ten years ago. Yet, it didn't matter. In the end, he had chosen his unsettled life over sharing a life with her.

Everyone was in the barn today, even George. Having the house to herself only made her feel lonelier. She hadn't slept well last night, and George's strained coughing wasn't the thing that had kept her up this time. Although she thought she'd gotten over the feeling of being rejected by her mail-order groom, she knew she must try again. Colt wouldn't stay in Last Chance forever, so she must find a man to help her family keep the shop going once George passed. And by the sounds of his incessant coughs at night, she wondered if his life was dwindling quickly.

Today she decided to dress like a woman, especially since she wouldn't be working in the shop. Unlike yesterday, she kept her hair long, not bothering to style it at all. However, she found a sunflower-colored blouse and black skirt that she had always enjoyed wearing for special occasions.

She found a book to read, so she curled up on the couch and opened the book. After thirty minutes, she realized she hadn't turned the page yet. Her mind just wouldn't focus. Instead, she really should figure out what to do with her life.

Perhaps Pastor Collins would be able to give her some

suggestions. Or maybe her friend, Heather James, would be of some assistance. After all, Heather was one of the women who kicked off the first advertisement for husbands after the blizzard that killed so many men.

A loud knock on the front door startled Blaze. She placed her book on the side table before moving off the couch. She reached the door and opened it. A man who appeared to be in his late twenties stood in front of her, holding a bowler hat to his chest. His light brown hair was slicked back on his head, and he was clean-shaven.

“Good morning,” the man said. “I’m looking for Mrs. Blaze Murphy.”

“I’m Mrs. Murphy.”

His smile stretched as his gaze moved from the top of her head, down to her brown boots, then lifting again to meet her gaze. His green eyes twinkled.

“I’m Kent Dalton... the man who was supposed to arrive yesterday to meet you.”

Blaze sucked in a surprised breath. “Oh, my...” She placed a hand on her upper chest. “I thought you had changed your mind.”

“I apologize for that. I had actually missed the stagecoach and had to take the next one coming to Last Chance. Forgive me for worrying you, Miss Murphy.”

Relief flooded over her, and for a moment, she wanted to cry. Instead, she smiled and was determined to look her best.

“Would you like to come inside?” She stepped back and motioned with her hand. “Do you have any trunks?”

He nodded. “I do.”

He turned and reached down to lift the single trunk near his feet. As he carried it into the house, she did a quick assessment of his physical attributes. So far, he appeared to be a strong man. But of course, she’d have to study his hands to make sure he had told her the truth about working at the shop. Dirt under his fingernails, as well as calloused hands, would let her know he hadn’t lied.

“I must admit,” she said warily, “that I was contemplating trying to find another mail-order groom this morning.”

He frowned, and sorrow shown in his green eyes. “Again, I’m very sorry for the mix-up. I hadn’t quite made it to the stagecoach before it left yesterday. All I could do was wait for the next one.”

“I’m just very happy that you are here now.” She motioned toward the stairs. “Let me show you to your room.”

She was grateful she hadn't decided to work in the barn today as she led the way. She would have looked differently when Mr. Dalton arrived, and he may have changed his mind about marrying her then. Now that she knew Colt's true feelings about settling down, she didn't want to pass up this chance to marry a man who was interested in a lifetime commitment.

Blaze hadn't quite decided whether she was upset with Colt or not. After all, she knew he wasn't the marrying kind, and yet she still proceeded to kiss him passionately – two separate occasions. She was definitely a foolish woman. But at least she'd be a foolish woman who was married.

She opened the door to the spare bedroom. "This is where you'll be staying."

"Until we're married?" he asked as he walked past her.

Her face heated without warning. Heavens, she was sure her face was as red as a turnip. She couldn't bring herself to think of their wedding night. Not yet. "Uh, yes."

Thankfully, he didn't look at her as he set his trunk on the floor at the end of the bed. Indeed, thinking about sharing the same bed with that man made her stomach twist. Although he was good-looking and strong, she feared she would be thinking of Colt the whole time. She needed to get that man out of her head once and for all.

When Mr. Dalton turned back and looked at her, he smiled. "Do you own this house?"

"No. My aunt and her husband own it."

"That's fine. I hope you don't mind if I want to build us a place of our own."

"That's all right with me."

An awkward silence hung in the air as he slowly moved around the room, checking things out before stopping by the window to peer outside. She felt jittery. She wished her mind would work properly.

"Um, Mr. Dalton? Are you hungry?"

He turned to look at her. "No. But I would like to see the wainwright shop if that's all right."

"Of course." She breathed a sigh of relief. "And my family is there, so I'll introduce you to them all."

"Splendid."

She turned back down the hallway, anxious to be around other

people. Marrying a stranger would be difficult, but she must adjust. It was better than living a lonely existence, knowing the man she truly loved would never want her as a wife.

“Miss Murphy.” Mr. Dalton grasped her arm, stopping her before she reached the stairs. “Before we go meet your family, there is something I must do first.”

As she waited for him to explain, she wasn’t prepared when he took her in his arms and placed his mouth over hers. She stiffened, and her first instinct was to slap his face and kick his shin for taking such liberties... until she remembered that he would soon be her husband. Still, it was difficult to allow him to kiss her when she immediately compared him to Colt. Poor Mr. Dalton came up lacking.

Finally, the man ended the kiss and stepped back. At first, she saw confusion in his expression, but then he smiled at her.

“Forgive me for surprising you like that, but I felt by kissing you, we could get rid of the awkwardness between us.”

She laughed uncomfortably. “Yes, well... I suppose it needed to be done.”

“It did.”

She straightened and turned back toward the stairs. “Now, let’s go to the shop and meet my family.”

As she led the way, Mr. Dalton’s kiss wouldn’t leave her mind. He was gentle and not forceful at all. He smelled nice. And if she hadn’t have kissed Colt, she would have thought Mr. Dalton might be able to make her swoon a time or two. Yet, he wasn’t Colt.

How was she going to give her heart and soul to Mr. Dalton when she couldn’t stop thinking about Colt? She wasn’t looking forward to her wedding now.



COLT STOOD BY THE FIREPLACE, heating the steel bar so that it would be soft enough to bend. On warm days like today, this was one thing he wished he wasn’t doing. However, it must be done to make the steel bar do what he wanted it to do. If only people were this easy. He hadn’t wanted to come to this little town to help his father, but his grandfather was the one holding Colt over the fire until he bent to the old man’s request.

Tightening his hold on the bar, he rotated it slightly. His grandfather’s inheritance was a lot of money – more than Colt

would ever see in a lifetime. Being the oldest grandson, Colt would do anything to get the money. Yet, breaking Blaze's heart and seeing her marry another man would make him want to leave this place before the year was up.

They could never go back to being friends. Not now, after sharing two steamy kisses and talking about their feelings. Not after holding her while she felt rejected when her mail-order groom ditched her and how Colt's heart wrenched for her.

There was no denying he loved her and that she fit perfectly in his arms. Yet, he wanted her in his life all the time, and marrying her would only pull them apart. He was too much like his father and couldn't stay in one place for very long. Colt saw the strain on his parents' marriage as he was growing up, and then when his mother had become sick, his father acted as if she wasn't important in his life, and Colt's father moved them again, which killed her.

Because Colt loved Blaze so much, he couldn't put her through that. She deserved happiness and a life married to the same man – until death.

He took the hot bar to his workstation and began to hammer the rod until it bent the way he wanted. So involved in his miserable thoughts, he didn't realize the others had stopped working. Their voices lifted in excitement.

Colt lifted his gaze. Across the room stood a very alluring woman next to a man. Colt didn't see the man as much as he studied Blaze. Maybe it was a good thing she didn't dress pretty like this all of the time. Thinking of her this way only played with his emotions.

"This is Mr. Kent Dalton... My soon-to-be husband," Blaze exclaimed mere seconds before her gaze rested on Colt. "He missed yesterday's stagecoach, and so he arrived today."

Shock spread through Colt, making him drop his hammer. *No!* This couldn't be right.

"Dalton?" George asked, struggling to get out of his chair. "You wouldn't happen to be related to Edward and Martha Dalton, would you?"

Kent's smile widened, almost appearing victorious, which Colt didn't understand. And yet, there could be only one reason why his cousin was suddenly in Blaze's life.

"Yes, Uncle George." Kent nodded. "Edward and Martha are my parents."

Gasps exploded in the room, coming mostly from Blaze. Her eyes were wide as she moved her attention between George and Colt.

"You... are George's nephew?" Blaze asked in a high-pitched voice as her gaze landed on Kent. "Did you know that before you answered my newspaper ad?"

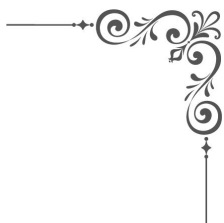
"I didn't." Shaking his head, Kent placed his hand to his chest. "It's definitely an odd coincidence."

"Coincidence, my hide," Colt snapped as he marched toward the well-dressed man and stopped in front of his cousin. "This was planned. I'll bet good money on it."

Blaze hitched a breath and stepped in between Colt and his cousin as she glared at Colt. "Just stop it now." She pushed her hands against Colt's chest, moving him back a few steps. "There was no way for Mr. Dalton to know that I lived with my aunt and her husband because I had never mentioned them in the few correspondences we had."

"Son," George placed a hand on Colt's shoulder. "Calm down. Kent didn't know. I haven't talked with my sister for several years. She didn't know we had moved here."

Colt clenched his teeth. Perhaps Kent's mother didn't know they had moved, but there was one person who knew. Grandfather... the man who tried to control everyone's lives and who might succeed in ruining Colt's life.



EIGHT

Blaze paced her bedroom, frustrated with the way the morning had turned out. Why did Colt have to ruin everything? The way he acted was like a jealous beau, but that was far from the truth. Why would he be jealous if he didn't want her as a wife?

If he had to stay in Last Chance for a year, she couldn't be around him. He would be watching Kent like a hawk, waiting for the moment to swoop in and find her new husband doing something that Colt wouldn't approve of.

Growling, she threaded her fingers through her hair. This was maddening! Perhaps it was time she move across town once she married Kent, only because she knew that seeing Colt all the time would make her upset. Maybe Kent would want to find somewhere else to work since he and Colt would be at the same place.

Her heart twisted from indecision, but she couldn't live her life this way. How was she expected to eventually fall in love with Kent if Colt was always in the way?

The knock on her bedroom door stopped Blaze's pacing. She moved to the door and opened it. Emma stood in the hallway, wringing her hands against her middle. Worry grew inside of Blaze, wondering why her cousin looked this way.

"Can I talk to you in private?" Emma asked.

Nodding, Blaze opened the door wider to allow her cousin inside before closing it to keep their conversation private. All of Blaze's life, she had wished she was as pretty as her cousins. Emma's hair was a strawberry-blonde, and Dakota's hair was a pretty brownish-

blonde. Both girls had angelic faces, and both were sweet and very well-mannered. Blaze definitely hadn't been brought up like that.

"I hope you don't mind me interrupting your alone time. Ma told Dakota and me to let you be by yourself for a while." She shrugged. "But I needed someone to talk to who can understand."

Blaze arched an eyebrow. "You think I will understand you?"

"Of course. After all, you had placed an ad for a mail-order groom."

Surprised, Blaze blinked with wide eyes. "You are going to look for a husband, as well?"

Emma shrugged her slender shoulders. "There aren't enough single men in town, and women my age need to do what everyone else has done – put an ad in the newspaper."

Blaze moved to her bed and sat on the edge, patting the space next to her. "All right, let's talk."

Emma sat on the bed, twining her fingers in her lap. "Thank you for helping me. I fear I cannot wrap my mind around the possibility of marrying a stranger. It scares me something fierce."

Blaze nodded. "It's a harrowing thought, that's for certain. How can you fall in love with someone when you can't bring yourself to trust them?" After the words left her mouth, she realized it was easy to fall in love with Colt, even if she didn't trust him to stick around just to get married.

"I've been thinking," Emma said, "that maybe I should just move away from Last Chance and find employment in a bigger town that has more men to marry."

"I had thought of doing that myself. However, men don't usually find a woman *wife*-worthy when she wears trousers and works on wagons." She placed her hand on her cousin's cold hands. "But you're nothing like me. If you went to live in another town, you'd have dozens of men lined up to court you."

Emma's cheeks turned pink. "You're just saying that because you're my cousin."

Blaze chuckled. "No, I'm saying that because it's the truth."

"So, do you think I should move to a bigger town?"

Blaze sighed. "That's up to you, but if roles were reversed, I would certainly spend some time away from Last Chance just to meet some available men."

Emma's shoulders dropped, and her expression changed to one of worry. "I thought you might say that. I... I just don't know what

I'd do by myself in a big city."

"Find employment of some kind. You like to paint, so maybe look for something that involves painting."

"Actually, I don't like to paint." Emma shrugged. "But out of everything there is to do in George's shop, painting is the only thing that's not strenuous."

Blaze snorted a laugh. "Oh, you're too much, dear cousin. However, I'm sure you'll find something that will entertain you as well as earn your keep. Between you and your sister, I believe you are the one who will be able to pull it off."

A smile stretched Emma's mouth, and she leaned over and hugged Blaze. "Thank you. I needed to hear that from you."

Blaze pulled back. "And if you need any help, let me know."

"After you're married, where will you live?"

Blaze sighed. "Mr. Dalton and I will have to build a house, I'm sure."

"But you are planning on staying in Last Chance?"

"Yes. This is my home. The people who live in this town are my friends. We all became close after the blizzard that killed our husbands."

"Hopefully, I'll find good friends when I leave this place, too."

Blaze gently squeezed her cousin's hand. "You will. I just know it."

Emma stood and moved to the door but stopped before reaching it. She turned to look at Blaze again. "You know, for years, I thought you and Colt would find love and get married. You two make an adorable couple."

Blaze's chest tightened with emotion as she fought back her tears of sorrow. "Yes, well... fate has different plans."

Emma gave her a sympathetic smile. "You were in love with him, weren't you?"

Nodding, Blaze expelled a deep sigh. "I thought I was, but I've had to change my feelings. After all, I'll be marrying Kent Dalton soon."

"Cheer up. At least he came to you. I, on the other hand, will have to go in search of a husband."

Chuckling, Blaze left the bed and walked to her cousin. "Life is odd that way, don't you think?"

"Yes, but I also think it's not fair."

"It's not, but we women do what we have to in order to

survive.”

“Indeed we do.” Emma placed her hand on the doorknob. “It’s sink or swim, right?”

“Exactly.”

As Emma left the room, Blaze knew she’d be swimming... even if it was with the sharks. Admitting defeat wasn’t something she did well.



SOMETHING MUST BE WRONG with Colt. He couldn’t stop sneaking around and spying on Kent. That man wasn’t truthful, and Colt wanted desperately to prove that their grandfather was behind this. The controlling old coot was famous for doing underhanded things like forcing two cousins to compete for the same thing.

Blaze didn’t work today. Instead, she took her beau into town to introduce him to her friends, but more importantly, to speak with the preacher and pick a wedding date.

Irritation grew inside Colt, making him put everything he had into fixing Doctor Hamilton’s wagon. At times Colt was so upset, he believed he could spit bullets. Why had his grandfather thought he could mess with Colt’s head? If he didn’t put a stop to the old man’s shenanigans, who would? And yet, the sizable amount of the inheritance would make any man weep with joy if they were given it.

But it was just money. If only he could look at it that way. Instead, he could only imagine what that kind of money would buy. Colt’s dreams would finally come true, and just maybe, he’d feel right about settling down and raising a family with the woman he loved.

Yet, the woman he loved would be getting married to his cousin very soon if he couldn’t stop it. That was not an option right now. He *must* stop it. And the only way he could change Blaze’s mind is by showing her exactly what kind of man Kent Dalton was.

Colt placed his tools on the bench and turned to let the others know that he was leaving early. However, as he swung his gaze around the barn, he realized he was the only one here. The sun was dipping on the horizon. Time had somehow passed by without him knowing what happened.

He needed to find Blaze, hopefully before supper, but definitely, before she and Kent shared more private time. Colt worried that his

cousin might sweet talk her until she was swooning in the man's arms.

Boiling inside from just the thought, Colt marched out of the barn and toward the house. The scent of freshly baked bread wafted through the slight breeze, making his stomach grumble. Emma and Dakota must have been busy in the kitchen this afternoon. Then again, Colt had no idea who was working in the shop with him today since his mind was on other things.

As he entered the house, he heard Lisa's voice and her giggling daughters. But he didn't detect Blaze's angelic voice amongst them. He peeked into the kitchen. Blaze wasn't there. He pulled away and walked to the stairs but stopped. Dare he go up to her room and talk to her there?

From the parlor, he heard his father speaking to someone. The weariness to the older man's tone and how he coughed more than he should made Colt's stomach twist. Was his father really dying, as Blaze had suggested? Colt didn't want to think of that right now. Instead, he had an engaged couple to break up first.

Taking soft steps, he moved toward the parlor, hoping nobody inside would see him. He stopped far enough away to see his father and Kent. Lisa's boys were sitting at a small table playing chess. After a few minutes of listening, Colt couldn't hear Blaze's voice. He prayed she wasn't in there because he didn't know how he was going to pull her out to talk to her in private.

He turned back to the stairs and hurried up them. His long stride skipped over every other step until he made it to the top. Then, he walked just as quickly toward Blaze's room. He knocked quietly on her door and listened inside. After a few moments, he knocked again. A little louder. Still, he didn't hear any movement from inside the room.

Grumbling, he left the hallway and rushed back downstairs and out the door. Thankfully, nobody tried to stop him. He stopped in the middle of the yard to think. Where would Blaze go to be by herself?

He grinned. The stream!

He broke into a run and was halfway there before realizing he could have saddled a horse and gotten there quicker. By the time he reached the water, he was out of breath.

No clouds hid the moon tonight, making it easier to see his way without a lantern. But a light from close to the stream let him know

that Blaze had been thinking ahead and brought her own lantern.

He walked slower, mainly to gain control over his irregular breathing. By the time he spotted her sitting on the gentle slope with her gaze on the water, he was able to take deep breaths.

"I thought I might find you here," he said softly, announcing himself.

She jumped and spun around on her bottom, facing him. Her eyes were wide. "Colt? What are you doing here?"

"You were the only one not at the house, so I came to find you."

"Is something wrong?"

"No. Father is having a discussion with Kent, which only makes my father cough more. And Lisa and her daughters are preparing the meal." He sat beside her on the ground. "I missed you at the shop today."

She shrugged and faced the water again. "I had a full day running errands."

"True." He paused briefly. "Did you meet with Pastor Collins to schedule a wedding date?" Colt realized the tone of his voice had changed and sounded edgier than before. Just the thought of her marrying his cousin left a bad taste in his mouth, too.

"Yes. The wedding will be in two days."

Gritting his teeth, he tried not to show his irritation. Not yet anyway. If he came across as a madman, that would only upset Blaze more. If Blaze became too irate, there was no talking to the woman.

He swallowed hard. "Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

She nodded without looking at him. "I'm sure," she snapped.

During the next few silent moments, he tried thinking about how he could put his thoughts into words without making her mad. Sadly, there was no way around it.

Sighing heavily, he turned toward her and touched her leg. She turned her head to look at him, but she wore a scowl instead of her pretty smile.

"Blaze, I have a bad feeling about this whole situation."

She arched an eyebrow. "That sounds like a personal problem to me."

"Yes, maybe it is. However, I know my cousin better than you do. His presence here isn't coincidental."

"Oh, really?" She pushed his hand off her leg. "Then please explain to me how he was the only man to reply to my newspaper

ad – the only man, let me remind you, that knew anything about the wainwright business.”

Colt frowned. “I think my grandfather is behind this.”

“Your grandfather?” She rolled her eyes. “Really, Colt? You can’t do any better than that?”

“Mine and Kent’s grandfather is a very controlling man. He’s like a puppet master if you will. He has money, and he uses it to get people to do his bidding.”

“Just stop, Colt.” She climbed to her feet and walked to the edge of the stream. “You’re just making up excuses now.”

“What if I’m not?” He quickly moved beside her. “What if I’m right?”

She spun around and folded her arms across her bosom. “Tell me why your grandfather would want Kent to marry me, especially when there are prettier girls out there with more money?” She shook her head. “I’m an orphan, Colt. You know that. I have nothing. So why would your grandfather pick me to have your cousin marry? Can you tell me that?”

He balled his hands into fists. “I don’t know... yet. But I’ll figure it out.”

“No, you won’t because there is nothing to figure out. Kent told me he had just left a job, looking for something else to do with his life. When he read about what happened to our town during the blizzard, he realized he needed to become a mail-order groom. It’s just that simple. Problem solved.”

“No, the problem is not solved. Kent Dalton is lying to you – to all of us.”

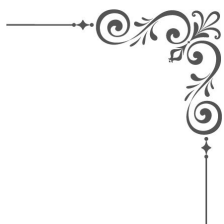
“Why would he lie, Colt?”

“Because my grandfather has promised him the inheritance.”

There was a brief pause before Blaze laughed. Then gradually, her laughter became louder, almost irritating.

“Oh, Colt. You’re too paranoid. Just because you are doing your grandfather’s bidding doesn’t mean all of your cousins will.” She turned away from him and walked to her lantern. As she picked it up, she looked over her shoulder. “Please, stop this nonsense, Colt. If you can’t accept the fact that I’m getting married, then...” She inhaled sharply. “Then I don’t want you at the wedding.”

Colt’s chest tightened, worse than it had done before. No! She couldn’t be serious. He couldn’t allow her to do this to him – to them. Yet, could he stop her at all?



NINE

Blaze stepped up to the door of her friend Carrie Hamilton's house and knocked. The beat of Blaze's heart hammered erratically, but only because of the serious conversation she needed to have with her friend. Although Blaze knew what Carrie was going to say, she had to hear the words in hopes that it would finally convince her she was doing the right thing.

Carrie opened the door, and her eyes lit up with surprise.

"Blaze? What are you doing here?"

"Have I come at a bad time?" Blaze asked.

"Heavens no, come inside."

As Blaze entered, she noticed her friend's small protruding belly and the pregnant glow to her pretty face. Blaze smiled, happy to see her friend was having another baby.

"Rumor has it," Carrie said, "that you will be getting married soon."

"Yes." Blaze tried to look excited, but her heart just wasn't in it.

"His name is Kent Dalton, and he will be able to take over the wainwright shop."

Worry creased Carrie's brow, and she took hold of Blaze's hands. "Is something wrong with Mr. Masterson?"

Blaze nodded. "He's not shaking the pneumonia he had a couple of months ago, and as each day passes, he gets weaker."

Carrie sighed. "Has he been to see my husband about it?"

"Yes, but nothing is helping, not even the medicine Doctor Hamilton gave him."

"I will pray for him." Carrie kept Blaze's hand in hers and led them to the couch, where they both sat. "Now tell me all about Mr. Dalton."

"He seems like a very nice man," Blaze began, remembering their talks from yesterday when she and Kent strolled through town. "And surprisingly enough, he is related to George."

"What a coincidence." Carrie tucked a piece of her brown, curly hair behind her ear.

"It really is, especially since George hasn't spoken to his sister for several years, so there was no way for Kent to know we lived in Last Chance."

"Remarkable." Carrie's grin widened. "But I suppose fate has stepped in to lend a helping hand."

"Yes, it certainly looks that way." Blaze said the words, but it was harder to believe that was what truly happened, especially since Colt had put doubts in her mind.

"Am I invited to your wedding?"

Blaze chuckled. "Of course, you are. I would be hurt if you didn't come."

"It will be a wonderful day, I'm certain."

Blaze took an uneasy breath. "How did you do it, Carrie? How were you able to marry a man you didn't know?"

Carrie's eyes twinkled with happiness. "Little did I know until I met him at the church, but I did know him. However, it still took a little while for us to get reacquainted with one another." Sighing, she relaxed back against the couch. "Don't try and rush things. The more you work together as a team, the better your marriage will turn out."

"But... did you have doubts at first?"

Carrie barked out a laugh. "I had quite a bit of them, actually. In the beginning, I never knew how much I would love Cade and how happy he would make me."

Although Blaze tried to fight it, her heart wrenched as she fought back the tears threatening to show. "I... I want to be sure before I exchange vows."

Compassion grew on Carrie's expression. "Oh, my dear Blaze. Not even people who are in love and begin their lives are truly certain they are making the right choices. That's what happened with my first marriage. I didn't know until after he'd died in the blizzard, but he was in love with another woman while married to

me.”

Surprise washed over Blaze. “That’s terrible.”

Carrie shrugged. “Yes, but now Cade Hamilton makes me happier than I’ve ever been, and I have put the past behind me where it belongs.”

Blaze’s chest tightened. Was that what she needed to do with Colt – put him in the past where he belonged? It was easier said than done since she had loved him for so long. “I hope you don’t mind me asking, but why did your first husband marry you if he was in love with another woman?”

“I honestly don’t know, unless he knew they couldn’t be together.”

Guilt came over Blaze, knowing she would be that person who married another and loved someone else. Yet, there wasn’t anything else she could do.

Carrie frowned. “Blaze? What is going on? Are you in love with another man?”

The tears Blaze wanted to keep away came forth in a rush as a sob formed in her throat. “Oh, Carrie. I don’t know what to do.” She covered her face with her hands.

Her friend’s comforting arms wrapped around her shoulders, and Blaze leaned her forehead against Carrie’s shoulder. Perhaps Blaze shouldn’t have cried in front of her friend, but she was at her wit’s end, trying to hold back her emotions, and now, her flood of tears would probably drown them both.

“Shhh,” Carrie stroked Blaze’s hair. “Don’t cry. All will work out.”

Shaking her head, Blaze pulled back and looked at her friend. “No, it won’t. I’m in love with George’s son, Colt, but he doesn’t want a wife. I don’t know how to get him out of my heart.”

Carrie gave her a sympathetic smile. “Do you know if he is in love with you?”

Blaze shrugged. “We have kissed passionately a few times, and Colt keeps trying to convince me not to marry Mr. Dalton, and yet, Colt hasn’t acted as if he’s changed his mind about marriage. He’s had several chances to declare his love to me and propose, but he hasn’t.”

“When were the times he kissed you?”

“The first one was at the masquerade party when I was dressed as Cleopatra. The last time was when I had gotten myself all dolled

up to meet Mr. Dalton at the stagecoach, but he didn't show that day because he missed the stage."

Carrie was silent for a few seconds, and soon awareness brightened her face. A grin stretched her mouth wide. "Oh, Blaze. I think I know how to get Colt jealous enough to propose."

Blaze laughed out loud. "I doubt he'll ever get that jealous."

"He might when he sees what he's missing."

Narrowing her gaze on her friend, Blaze asked, "What exactly do you have in mind?"

"Something truly wonderful, I promise."



COLT WAS HALF OUT OF his mind worrying about Blaze. But she was a stubborn woman, which coincidentally was one of the things he had first liked about her. It was already the end of another day, and still, she hadn't canceled her wedding. Tomorrow was the big day, and he didn't know how to stop it.

He lay in his bed, gazing out the window. The night was warm, and he had taken off his shirt, but that wasn't cooling him down. He needed cold water, and maybe it would both cool him down and get Blaze off his mind tonight. Sleep was what he needed to stay sharp for her wedding.

Inwardly, he groaned. Was he really going to the wedding, knowing she was marrying a man she would never love? If only he wanted to settle down, he'd snatch up Blaze in a heartbeat. Yet, the more he thought of her marrying another man, the more his stomach twisted in knots. He felt helpless. Maybe he needed to leave town sooner rather than later. At least he wouldn't have to see her as another man's wife every day for the next year.

There was no way he'd get any sleep tonight!

He climbed out of bed and scrubbed his palms over his day-old whiskers as he moved to the back door of the barn. A gentle wind touched his chest, but it didn't cool him off. The half-moon helped bring light to the land, and he was very tempted to head on down by the stream and soak himself in the water.

Out of the corner of his eye, there was a movement of white material. He swung his gaze in that direction and studied the figure, slowly moving back and forth near the trees. It looked as if it could be a woman, but he wasn't sure.

He took careful steps toward the figure until he could see her

more clearly. What was Blaze doing wandering around at night in her nightdress... and her glorious auburn hair hanging around her shoulders and down her back?

When he walked closer, she jumped and turned toward him. Sucking in a fast breath, she placed her hand on her bosom.

“Colt? What are you doing out here?”

Her gaze darted around the area as if she was looking for someone. Immediately, he knew. She’d come out here to meet Kent. Anger filled Colt, and he wanted to yell at her for being so absentminded. And yet, she would be marrying his cousin tomorrow, so did it really matter?

No, it was wrong no matter how much he tried to reason the excuse. “Well, I was on my way to the stream to cool off, but I saw you out here instead.”

Her laugh seemed forced and uncomfortable. “I’m sorry you had to come and check on me, but I assure you, I’m fine.”

He stepped closer and arched an eyebrow. “Blaze, what are you doing out here in your nightdress, looking... so very alluring?” Maybe he shouldn’t have said that last part, but the words flew from his mouth before he could stop them.

“I um... well, I was clearing my head. My room was too warm, and I couldn’t sleep.”

“It’s definitely a warm night.” And unfortunately, because she looked so alluring, his body became even warmer.

She took a quick glance toward the house and then back to Colt. “Well, I’ll let you be on your way.” She motioned with her hand toward the direction of the stream.

Inwardly, he boiled. She was trying to get rid of him, but he wasn’t going to be pushed away so easily. “Are you waiting for someone?”

“What?” she asked in a high-pitched voice.

“You keep looking toward the house, so I wondered if maybe you were waiting for someone. You know, like... Kent?”

She swallowed hard, which made a noise. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m in my nightclothes.”

“Exactly.” He stepped closer to her, and she retreated slowly. “And by your actions, I’m seeing that you are indeed waiting for him.”

“Please, Colt. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I happen to think I know *exactly* what I’m talking about.”

She stopped when she bumped into a tree, but that didn't stop Colt. He didn't stop until he was mere inches in front of her, leaning against her with his arm bracing the tree trunk just above her head. Heavens, she smelled good tonight, as if she had planned this moment. But of course, she had – for Kent!

"Colt, I don't think..." She pressed her hands against his bare chest before sucking in a breath.

The warmth from her touch ignited a fire that started deep inside him. At this moment, he didn't care that she was going to get married tomorrow. He'd make sure that tonight the only man on her mind was him.

"You shouldn't," she whispered huskily. "We shouldn't..."

"Oh, but my darling Cleopatra, we *will*!"

Colt bent his head and brushed his lips against her forehead. Her breathing had turned ragged, which only increased the rhythm of his heart, making him want to continue the torturous pleasure.

He trailed his lips down her face slowly, keeping the kisses feathery soft. She'd closed her eyes, which gave him more hope. When he reached her mouth, she held her breath. He wanted to smile from the victory he felt, although he hadn't won anything yet.

"Colt," she sighed. "We shouldn't do this. I'm getting married. Tomorrow, I will be Kent's wife, and he... will have husbandly rights."

Panic began to well inside Colt, but he pushed it down. That was not the emotion he wanted to feel at this moment. Instead, he wanted passion to take over. He didn't want her to think of his cousin anymore tonight – or tomorrow, for that matter.

"But you're not married yet." He brushed his lips against her lips. "And you are with *me* now."

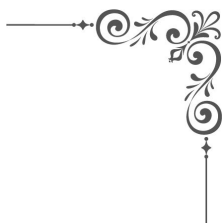
Circling his arms around her, he stopped any further talk by kissing her. A moan rattled from her chest as she melted against him. Her gentle touch on his chest had turned him jealous, and he didn't want her touching any other man but him.

And... he was going to do his best to see that happened.

He broke the kiss and pulled back just enough to lift her in his arms. Gasping, she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Colt? Where are you taking me?"

He grinned. "Someplace where nobody can find us, because my sweet Blaze, I'm not letting you go tonight."



TEN

Blaze couldn't believe it. Carrie had been right, and Colt did exactly what Blaze's friend promised he'd do when seeing her in her nightclothes, acting as though she waited for Kent in the thicket of trees. But now, all she could think about was Colt's sultry kisses and the possessive way he picked her up in his arms, carried her to his horse, and they rode toward the stream.

His strong arms kept her against his chest, and not a word was spoken until they reached the water. It thrilled her that he knew being by a stream calmed her. Sometimes he knew her better than her own family, just as she knew everything about him.

Colt stopped the horse and dismounted, and seconds later, lifted her back in his arms as he carried her toward the water. Near the bank, he knelt on the ground. Gently, he laid her down and stretched out beside her, propped up on his elbow as he gazed into her eyes and caressed her cheek.

"Do you remember the first time we met?" he asked.

She smiled. "Of course, I do." She arched an eyebrow. "But the real question should be – do *you* remember?"

"It was the day my father married Lisa. I was sulking behind the house after the ceremony, and you walked up to me and asked what was wrong." He winked and drew his finger over the bridge of her nose. "You had the cutest freckles across your nose. And your hair was in a braid."

Her heart fluttered. He actually remembered. "And you had told me that you wanted to be alone."

He chuckled. "But you wouldn't let me."

"No. I knew what it felt like to be alone, and I knew you needed a friend."

"You were an amazing friend." His caress moved slowly down her face. "Sometimes I thought you could read my mind because you were so quick to understand me."

She reached up and stroked his hair. "I understood you because we both lost our mother, and I felt as neglected as you had."

Colt closed his eyes and leaned against her touch. He was the most handsome man she'd ever met, and she would never think differently. She just prayed he would see her for more than a friend and that he would want her as his wife.

"I want this moment to last forever," he said.

Her heart melted. She felt the exact way. "If only we could. However, tomorrow I'm—"

"Shhh." He kissed her lips briefly before staring into her eyes. "I don't want you to talk about that. Enjoy what you have right here, right now."

Her body trembled with anticipation, and being in his arms made it worse. Yet, her heart was jumping so fast, she feared she'd lose her breath soon. Although she wanted to lean up and kiss him, she needed to remember what Carrie told her. Colt needs to be the one who takes control of everything to think it is his idea. All Blaze had to do was remind him from time to time that she was getting married tomorrow. But if he kissed her passionately, she knew she wouldn't be able to think of anything else.

"Colt..." She sighed heavily, knowing she wouldn't be able to think in a few more minutes.

"Yes, my sweet Blaze?"

"Colt, please..."

"Please, what?" he whispered as he brushed his lips across hers again.

"Please... kiss me."

As soon as his mouth covered hers, she wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging tightly to him. She kissed him with all the love she felt rushing through her right now, hoping she could change his mind about marriage. Carrie's idea had to work. If not... Blaze pushed the doubt aside, not wanting to think about that right now. Colt was hers now, and she'd make the best out of the situation.

He gathered her in his arms, laying partially on top of her. The kiss turned passionate – almost wild. Blaze was having a difficult time breathing as it was with her heart racing with excitement. But she didn't want this moment to end. However, she knew full well what would happen if they didn't slow things down. Although she wanted to be with Colt like *that*, she wanted it after they were married. Yet, would that ever happen?

Her stomach clenched. No. She must make it happen.

Tears gathered in her eyes, and she couldn't stop them from running down her cheeks. Finally, she broke the kiss and buried her face in his neck as she tried to get her breathing under control. What was wrong with her? She had been so confused lately and feeling like she was drowning. Where was the strong-willed woman she had been once upon a time?

"Blaze," Colt whispered against her forehead. "Please, don't cry."

Shaking her head, she tightened her arms around him. "I can't... stop."

"Shhh." He kissed her forehead again. "You're breaking my heart, my darling Blaze."

"Now you know how I'm feeling right now."

He sighed and rolled to his back, taking her with him, keeping her head against his shoulder. "Yes, I'm sure I do know how you feel."

"Do you?" She lifted her head, peering down into his eyes. "Do you really, Colt? Do you know how it's tearing me apart inside to want something so badly but knowing you can never have it?"

He cupped her cheek, wiping the pad of his thumb across the skin and removing her tears. "Yes, I know."

"What about *loving* someone so much and not having them return those emotions?"

Sadness filled his expression. "Blaze, I do love you."

"Yes, like a friend, I know."

"No, my darling. I love you more than just a friend." His gaze dropped to her mouth. "I love you so much, it hurts."

Perhaps he did understand her feelings after all. "Then... why don't you want me?"

"Believe me when I say I want you desperately, Blaze."

Tears blurred her vision again. "Then why don't you want me enough to marry me?"

A small smile touched his mouth. "I do want you as my wife, but I worry that you don't want me as your husband."

She sat up and wiped the tears from her face. Had she heard him correctly? Why did she doubt herself right now? "Why wouldn't I want you as my husband? I've loved you for all of these years."

He rolled to his side and propped himself up on his bent arm. "Because I don't stay in one place for very long. That's not the kind of life a wife wants, especially when she starts having children." He shrugged. "My father moved Mother and me around so many times, which eventually caused her to get sick and die. I saw the stress it put on my mother, and I don't want to do that to the woman I love."

Once again, her hopes were crushed. Carrie's plan hadn't worked after all. "Then I have no other choice. I must get married to a man who wants me as his wife and who wants to settle down in one place." She stood, gathering her stubbornness. "I cannot wait for you any longer, Colt. I hope you won't become too lonely in your miserable life."

She turned and ran away from the stream, not caring that she was barefoot and in her nightdress. Behind her, Colt called out her name, but she continued to run. She heard his heavy breaths coming closer, and she prayed she could outrun him, but when his arms wrapped around her, stopping her, she knew there was no way out this time.

"Blaze," he said out of breath. "I love you. I don't want to lose you... even if it means marrying you."

She hitched a breath and looked at him over her shoulder. "What did you say?"

He smiled. "I want to marry you."

"But what about your freedom of going from place to place without a care in the world?"

Colt turned her in his arms and kissed her. She hesitated in participating only because she didn't think a kiss was the answer to her question. But he pulled back and pressed his forehead against hers.

"I'd rather kiss you all the time and be with you every moment of the day because you make me happy." He kissed her again, slightly longer this time, but he pulled away and met her gaze. "I've been traveling so much in my life. Maybe all I need is someone special like you to make me want to settle down."

She inhaled a ragged breath. "But what if you become bored with me?"

He chuckled. "That will never happen. We know how to have fun together. You make me laugh, just like I know how to make you laugh."

Gradually, her body relaxed. She wanted to believe everything would work out. "Are you willing to marry me tomorrow?"

"What about Kent? I think we should tell him that he won't be the groom tomorrow."

She nodded. "I'll talk to him in the morning. The ceremony isn't until four o'clock in the afternoon."

He pulled her closer. "I would marry you tonight if it meant having you forever."

This time, the tears that filled her eyes were because of the happiness growing inside her. "I love you, Colt. I promise you won't regret your decision."

"No, I'll never regret loving you."

When he kissed her, she decided to participate. After all, she finally had something to celebrate.



ALTHOUGH BLAZE DIDN'T get much sleep last night, she was up before the crack of dawn. Kissing Colt without feeling guilty made for a very enjoyable night.

She quickly rushed around her room, getting dressed and pulling back her hair in a ponytail. Before everyone started preparing for the wedding this morning, Blaze needed to find Kent and tell him the wedding was off.

She hurried downstairs, but thankfully, nobody was roaming the house. As she took the stairs again, she tread softly, making her way toward Kent's room. She knocked on his door and listened, but there was no movement from inside. Dare she open the door and peek in? She just couldn't wait to tell him that she wouldn't marry him.

Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and turned the doorknob, cracking the door enough to look inside. Kent wasn't in his bed.

She groaned and closed the door. Where could he have gone so early in the morning?

When she moved back down the stairs, she didn't care who

heard her. There was only one thing on her mind, and she couldn't think of anything else until that was resolved.

As she passed the parlor, George's coughing brought her out of her thoughts, and she paused at the doorway. He sat in his cushioned chair – a place he usually sat these days. He turned to look at her before motioning his hand for her to enter.

"What are you doing up so early?" he asked before a fit of coughs took over.

She hated to see him like this. He'd been the father figure in her life for ten years. It was difficult to see him so weak and thin like this. "I actually need to talk to Kent."

George shook his head. "It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride on their wedding day."

Her stomach twisted in knots. She would have to tell George about her decision. Hopefully, he loved his son more than his nephew.

"Do you know where he is?"

George nodded. "I sent him to the hotel last night. He didn't need to be here while you were getting ready for the ceremony. It's bad luck, you know." He grinned.

"George," she said, moving to a chair and sitting. "I'm not going to marry Kent."

The older man's eyes widened. "Does he know that?"

"No, which is why I want to find him. I decided last night that he's not the man for me."

George's expression withered. "Oh, my dear Blaze. Please tell me you're not pining away for my son."

She tried swallowing the lump of emotion in her throat. "I'm in love with Colt."

"Blaze, you know as well as I do that he'll never settle down."

Sighing, she smiled. "Actually, I had a long talk with him last night, and... he proposed. He does want to settle down with me."

The man's countenance brightened, and he leaned forward in his chair. "He did? He actually said that?"

She smiled. "Yes, he said that."

"So, you won't be marrying Kent today?"

"No. In fact, I'm hoping Pastor Collins will agree to marry me to Colt today, instead."

"This is such exciting news!" George stood and wobbled.

She jumped out of her chair to help him. "George, please be

careful. You will have to walk me down the aisle, you know.”

He chuckled. “Yes, I know.” He patted her arm. “Knowing that my son is getting such a wonderful wife does my heart good. And I’m beyond thrilled that he is the one that will win the bet.”

Bet? Her breath stalled. “George? What are you talking about?”

“Well, I suppose you’ll find out soon enough.” He coughed. “My father didn’t know who to give his inheritance to. Of course, I wanted Colt to have it, but my father – the stubborn old coot – didn’t think Colt would ever settle down and get married.” His smile grew. “I knew he was in love with you ten years ago, so I thought if he came back here to help me with the wainwright shop, then he’d see you and want to marry you. However, my father thought that Colt needed a little nudging, which is why he corresponded with Kent to have him answer your advertisement for a mail-order groom. Whichever man married you would get the inheritance.”

She couldn’t breathe. Her tight chest and throat would suffocate her. “No, George. No...” She shook her head. “Don’t say that. If Colt ever found out, he’ll leave.” Her eyes stung with unshed tears. “He won’t want to marry me.”

“Of course, he will.”

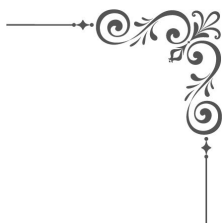
“No.” She sniffed back a sob. “The only reason he wants to marry me is so that I won’t marry Kent. If he knows Kent is out of the way...”

A sob broke loose, and she ran out of the room, down the hall, and out of the house. She slowly inhaled the morning air, hoping it would clear her mind on what to do. She had to talk to Colt first because if he wasn’t going to marry her, she had to marry Kent.

She broke into a run, hurrying toward the barn. The tears filled her eyes faster, but she wiped them away. She opened the back door and darted inside. “Colt!” Hopefully, he wasn’t asleep. She was sure her high-pitched tone would startle him.

She quickened her step toward his room. The door was open, so she stepped inside. He wasn’t in bed either, but she noticed the wooden drawers were all pulled out and empty. The trunk Colt had brought with him was gone.

Falling to her knees, she let the sobs take over her body. Colt had left her. Apparently, he didn’t want to get married as much as he said he did.



ELEVEN

Colt's head felt as if someone stood above him, pounding a hammer against his skull. Usually, he only felt this terrible after drinking too many cups of whiskey. Yet, he hadn't touched a drop since arriving in Last Chance.

A high-pitched whistling sound made his ears feel like they were going to burst. If he didn't stop the sound soon, he'd go mad. But as he struggled to lift his hands, he realized they wouldn't move.

Slowly, his mind began to open, and he briefly recalled seeing someone in his bedroom last night after making sure Blaze was in the house, safe. Before he could ask who was in his room, something hard struck his head.

He groaned. What had happened to him? Had someone really tried to kill him? Yet, what other reason did they have for hitting Colt over the head?

His eyelids felt like bags of sand, but he struggled to open his eyes. The sun shone through the window and onto his face, making his headache pound harder. He squinted, but it didn't help much. Instead, he turned his head, hoping to get a look at the room where he was at. He was on a cot, and yet, the room was nicely decorated with blue curtains and a few items of furniture. The bed sat closer to the window, but there was also a dresser, a cushioned chair, and a small table and wooden chair.

I'm in a hotel room? Who would do a stupid thing like that?

He moved his arms again, and it felt as if his wrists were tied together with a rope... as well as his ankles. He cursed and tugged

at his arms again, but the rope was tightly secure.

The high-pitched noise stopped, and Colt realized there was someone in the room who had been whistling a tune. He rolled on the cot, hoping to see more of the room. Standing in front of a mirror hanging on the wall was none other than his idiot cousin. Kent was dapper in his nice suit as he fixed his string tie.

Kent glanced toward Colt through the reflection. A grin of victory pulled across his mouth. "Good morning, cousin."

Colt swore again. "What are you doing? Why did you tie me up?"

Kent turned toward Colt and arched an eyebrow. "Which question do you want me to answer first?"

The man's smug attitude made Colt want to punch him in the face. Once he was out of these ropes, that would be the first thing he did. "Why did you tie me up?"

"Because I don't want anything to stop my wedding in an hour. And I know you are in love with Blaze, so you will definitely try to stop the wedding."

Colt glared at his cousin. "She doesn't want to marry you. She told me last night. I proposed to her, and she accepted."

Shrugging, Kent turned back to the mirror and combed his hair. "Well, if she goes to your room in the barn, she's going to notice everything is gone." He pointed to the space by the door where Colt's trunk sat. "She's going to think you up and left, which is what you've always done. So, she will have no other choice but to marry me." He grinned wider. "And because I'm the first grandson getting married, our grandfather's inheritance will go to me because I won the bet."

Anger shot through Colt, making his head pound harder. "What are you talking about?"

"Your father bet dear old Grandfather, that you would be married first, which is why he brought you to Last Chance. If Blaze didn't fall in love with you, there are plenty of other women in town who needs a husband." He flipped his hand in the air. "Anyway, Grandfather didn't think you were ever going to settle down, which is why he sent me here. He knew I'd get Blaze to marry me."

Colt wasn't sure who he wanted to punch first – his father or grandfather. No, Kent would get it first.

Growling, he struggled harder, trying to twist out of the rope

binding his hands. "I won't let you marry her," he snapped. "She loves me."

Kent blew out an irritated sigh, turned, and folded his arms over his chest. "Think about this for a moment, Colt. Which one of us will make Blaze the better husband? You know as well as I do that you aren't husband material, but I am."

"Blaze loves me, not you."

"It's not about love." Kent shook his head. "It's about winning our grandfather's inheritance, and well... that's me." He walked toward the door, picking up his bowler hat off the table on the way. "Oh, and I won't be back to untie you or even to feed you. Hopefully, one of the hotel maids will come to check out the room when she realizes I'm not returning."

"You won't win," Colt yelled. But as his cousin walked out of the room and closed the door, Colt's heart sank. He was all tied up, and there was less than an hour before the wedding. He had to get out. He couldn't let Blaze marry that greedy man.

He rolled off the cot, landing on the floor in a hard thud. The beating of his head threatened to upheave his stomach, but he clenched his teeth and scooted toward the bed. There must be something in this room to help him get loose. With his arms tied behind him and his legs bound at the ankles to keep him from standing, how was he going to do anything?

Silently, he prayed for guidance. He could not let Kent win!



SMILING WASN'T PART of Blaze's wedding attire. Lisa, Emma, and Dakota fawned over Blaze as they fixed her hair pretty and helped her with the baby-blue dress that she'd wear when she exchanged vows with Kent. As heartbroken as she was, she couldn't cry. Too many tears had been wasted for a man who obviously didn't love her as much as he loved being free.

Lisa kept giving Blaze worried glances, but after telling her aunt that she was just *nervous*, Blaze was tired of repeating herself. Apparently, George hadn't told Lisa about the conversation Blaze had with him this morning because everyone was acting as if nothing had happened since they had sat around the kitchen table planning out her wedding.

After the last baby's breath flower had been stuck in Blaze's elegantly braided bun Emma has fashioned for her wedding, her

cousin stepped back and admired her work. Lisa and her daughters gazed at Blaze with twinkles in their eyes.

"You are such a beautiful bride," Lisa said in a choked voice. "Your parents would have been so proud of you."

Holding back the emotion clogging Blaze's throat, she nodded and whispered, "Thank you."

Lisa turned her daughters toward the door. "Go make sure your brothers have the wagon ready. Bring a blanket for Blaze to sit on so that she doesn't get her dress dirty."

Blaze's giggling cousins hurried out of the bedroom, but taking a step toward the door was nearly impossible. She didn't want to marry Kent. Even though Colt was gone, marrying Kent would only remind her of what she would never have – a man who truly loved her. Yet, she had to go. There would be people at the church waiting for her. Carrie would be there... even though Blaze didn't think she could look at her friend without crying her eyes out.

"Blaze, honey." Lisa moved in front of her, frowning. "What is really wrong?"

Shaking her head, she inhaled slowly, trying to gain courage. "Aunt Lisa, please stop worrying. I just have the nervous bride jitters."

"I think it's more than that." She stepped closer and took hold of Blaze's cold hands. "Is it because Colt left?"

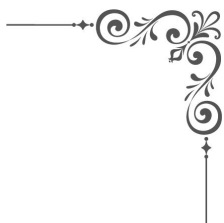
Don't you dare cry! Blaze blinked quickly, praying she could keep her tears from showing. "He was my best friend." Her voice cracked, and she licked her dry lips. "Of course, I'm going to be upset that he didn't even stick around for my wedding."

"I honestly wish I knew what was wrong with that man."

"Aunt Lisa, can we please stop talking about him? I want to go to the church and get married."

Lisa nodded and walked ahead of Blaze. Finally, she convinced her feet to move because standing in her room wouldn't accomplish anything. The only thing she wanted right now was for this day to be over with – for the ceremony to be finalized and for her and Kent to start their lives together as husband and wife.

She must believe that time would heal all wounds, and hopefully, she would soon come to love her husband as much as she had loved Colt.



TWELVE

Colt didn't know how many times he cursed his cousin, father, and old coot, who considered himself their grandfather. But cursing his family wouldn't remove his binds any quicker. The clock on the mantel chimed the hour of four o'clock. The wedding would be starting now.

Taking deep breaths, he held back his tears. He couldn't cry yet. Maybe something would happen to stall the ceremony until he arrived. But, if Blaze thought he had left town, she would proceed with the wedding.

As the clock chimed the fourth time, Colt released a loud yell, angry that fate was doing this to him. For all these years, he'd tried to protect his heart, not wanting to fall in love for the fear that he'd lose her just as his father had lost Colt's mother. Unfortunately, he fell in love, anyway. Being with Blaze last night had been a dream come true. He always enjoyed talking to her, and now he looked forward to kissing her whenever he wanted.

That wouldn't happen now. Not until he could get out of here and stop the wedding.

He rolled and scooted toward the door. Using his feet, he pounded against the hard piece of wood, hoping someone in this place would see what was happening. As he kicked, he yelled for help.

Time seemed to go slowly, yet it was going too fast when he looked at the clock. He wasn't going to make it in time, but he had to try. He couldn't give up now.

Finally, he heard heavy footsteps coming up the hallway. Stopping his kicking, he listened. When someone knocked on the other side of the door, Colt almost cried with relief. "Help me, please. I'm tied up."

He scooted aside as the door slowly opened. One of the hotel porters looked at Colt. It only took seconds before the young man's face paled.

"You're bleeding, sir." He hurried inside and knelt by Colt, reaching toward his head.

"Don't worry about my head," Colt snapped. "Untie me. Quickly!"

He rolled to his side as the younger man loosened the ties at his hands. Colt yanked free of the binds and reached down to untie his feet. "Is there a sheriff in town?"

"Yes, sir. Sheriff Darcy." The man's head bobbed.

"Go fetch him and tell him to get to the church as fast as he can. There's an injustice being done, and it needs to be stopped."

"Yes, sir." The porter sprinted out of the room.

Colt jumped to his feet. He swayed but quickly placed his hands on the wall until the swimming in his head disappeared. He took deep breaths as he convinced himself he could do this. He didn't know how badly his head had been cut and bled, but it didn't matter. Blaze needed rescuing, and he was going to do it.

He glanced at the clock on the mantel again. *Four-fifteen.*

"No!" He cried out, darting out of the room.

As he ran from the hotel, the pressure in his head threatened his vision, but determination guided his footsteps toward the church. Nothing would stop him. Not even a bullet could slow him down now.

I'm coming, Blaze, my love!

Finally, he reached the church. Out of breath, he pushed open the double doors and came to a stop. Rose petals littered the aisle from the doors to the pulpit where Pastor Collins would stand. But nobody was here. From the looks of the floor and pews, the guests had been here but were gone.

Colt's throat restricted as tears filled his eyes. No! This can't be right. He hadn't lost her forever, had he? And, even if she was a married woman now, she could get a divorce.

He must believe that she didn't hate him for doing this to her. After all, if Kent hadn't knocked him out last night, Colt would be

married to his true love by now.

His stomach churned as he turned and walked away from the church. He searched his mind with the conversations Lisa and her children had about Blaze's wedding, but Colt hadn't been listening. Jealousy had plugged his ears to anything about Blaze's wedding. Now he didn't know where to look for her. Kent mentioned that he wasn't coming back to the hotel, so where else would the married couple go for their first night as husband and wife?

The thought made Colt gag. He couldn't think like that. He must try and stay positive that he would find her before tonight. Hopefully, she would forgive him and divorce her rotten, deceiving husband.

As he neared the barn, his legs felt as though he'd been dragging a whole wagon by himself. His body was weak, and he fought with his mind to stay alert. His mental and physical exhaustion didn't matter right now. Finding Blaze was all he cared about.

Up ahead at the house, he noticed a one-person buggy – the same one he saw before at Doctor Hamilton's office. Had something happened to his father? Or was it Blaze that the good doctor had come to visit?

Pushing himself harder, he hurried to the house, rushed inside and stopped. Voices from the parlor were the first things he heard. He headed toward the room, and the closer he came, the voices sounded as if people were crying.

When he entered the room, he noticed Lisa's children sitting on the couch and chairs. Each one held a handkerchief to their mouths as they cried. Emma was the first one to see him. She jumped up and came toward him. Her tears multiplied the closer she got.

"What's happened?" he asked tightly.

"It's your father. He... He..."

"He what?" He grasped her shoulders. "What's wrong with my father?"

Shaking her head, she sobbed in her handkerchief. From the couch, Dakota stood and wiped her eyes.

"Colt, the doctor said your father is dying. He doesn't have much longer to live."

Suffocation gripped his throat and chest. Why was this happening today? He needed to find Blaze. However, if his father was dying, Colt had to see him first.

"They are up in your father's room," Emma said, pointing to the

stairs.

He left the parlor and ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Lisa's sobs echoed down the hallway. Sadness grew heavy in Colt's chest, and he wondered if he would even be able to look at his father without bawling like a baby. He must be strong. That was what most of his life had taught him that men don't cry. Real men handled life's problems and didn't cry when their mother died. Real men didn't cry when the woman they loved married another man.

Before reaching his father's room, Colt wiped the tears from his eyes. As he stepped in, the first person he saw was Blaze. She stood by the window, staring out, looking prettier than he'd ever seen before. Yet, where was Kent? Colt still needed to punch the man in the face, but that would have to wait until after he said his goodbyes to his father.

"Colt," Lisa gasped. "You're hurt!"

Blaze swung around so fast, it looked as if she lost her balance. Her eyes were wide, but she said nothing. He couldn't tell if she was happy to see him or mad.

Colt looked away and stepped toward his father. Lisa met Colt halfway, taking him by the hand. "Your father isn't doing well at all."

Colt couldn't take his eyes off the feeble man lying in bed who struggled with each breath. Color had left his father's face. Even the man's lips appeared to be a light shade of blue.

Colt fell to his knees beside the bed and gently held his father's hand. "Pa?" His voice broke.

His father's eyelids fluttered as he looked at Colt. The hint of a smile touched the man's mouth.

"You came back," his father said in a raspy voice.

Colt nodded. "I hadn't left, Pa. I'd been wounded, but I'm here now, and I don't plan on going anywhere."

"This... is your home."

"Yes, Pa."

"And... your family... is here, too."

Colt glanced briefly at Blaze as his heart continued to wrench. Tears were running down her cheeks. "Yes, my family is here," he said, looking back at his father.

"You're... a good son. I've always loved you."

Colt's lips trembled as he held back the sob ready to escape him. But he couldn't. He must be strong. "I love you, Pa. I'm sorry for

everything. Will you please forgive me?"

"I... already have."

His father coughed weakly and slowly, his eyes closed. Doctor Hamilton bent closer to his patient and listened to his heart with a stethoscope. After a few seconds, the doctor frowned and straightened, shaking his head.

Lisa bawled and fell against her husband. Colt couldn't move. All he could do was stare at his dead father. Tears dampened his cheeks, but Colt hadn't the strength to wipe them away. At least he hadn't cried in front of his father.

"Colt?"

He felt a soft hand on his shoulder, and he glanced up into Blaze's teary eyes. "Are you all right?"

He nodded. "Yes. I'm just glad I made it in time to tell him goodbye."

"I'm glad you did, too."

She brushed her fingers across his forehead and cringed. "Will you come downstairs and let me bandage your wound?"

Colt looked back at his father, resting peacefully now. He leaned over the man and kissed his clammy forehead. "Goodbye, Father." He paused and then added, "When you see Mother in Heaven, tell her I miss her."

He stood and walked in a daze out of the room. Doctor Hamilton followed.

"Mr. Masterson? Will you let me look at your cut?" His gaze moved to Colt's forehead. "You might need stitches."

Colt looked at Blaze. All he wanted to do right now was be with her as they comforted each other over his father's passing. "What do you think? Does it look that bad?"

She moved closer and lifted a lock of his blood-soaked hair, studying his injury. Closing his eyes, he inhaled her sweet fragrance. He'd never forget that smell as long as he lived.

"Doctor Hamilton?" she said.

Colt opened his eyes to gaze at her loveliness again, but her attention was on the doctor.

"What do you think, Miss Murphy?"

"I don't think he'll need stitches. I can bandage him if you don't mind."

"Go right ahead."

Taking Colt's hand, Blaze led him to her bedroom and her bed.

He sat on the edge of the mattress, watching her find the bandages and cream she needed to tend to his wound.

“Where is your husband?” he asked softly.

She moved to the door and closed it before turning back to look at him. “I didn’t get married. Your father collapsed before he could walk me down the aisle.”

Relief flooded through Colt, making him want to cry again. When tears swam in his eyes, he blinked. “Oh, my love. I’m so sorry.”

Keeping her shoulders stiff, she moved to him and stopped. Her attention was on his head, and he wished she would meet his gaze.

“What happened to you?” she asked.

“Kent knocked me out and tied me up.” Her focus dropped to his eyes, so he continued. “He knew I was in love with you, and he didn’t want anything stopping him from winning the bet.”

She gasped. “You knew about the bet?”

“Not until he told me before leaving for the church.” He shook his head. “The rotten man tied me up and left me in his room at the hotel. It was by sheer luck that someone came to help me.” A lump formed in his throat. “I feared I was too late to stop your wedding. I was half-mad out of my mind trying to find you.”

Her pretty face relaxed, and she tenderly cupped his chin. “I was half out of my mind thinking you’d left town because you didn’t want to marry me.”

“Where is the fool, anyway?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care.” She smiled. “If I see him again, it’ll be too soon.”

“Well, I plan on seeing him again just so that I can punch him in the face.”

“Now that, I’d love to watch.”

Colt loved the way her eyes lit up when she smiled. “Would you have married Kent if my father hadn’t collapsed?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t want to, and my heart fought my mind the whole time. I wanted a miracle to happen that would stop the wedding.” She frowned. “I’m sorry the miracle had to be your father’s death.”

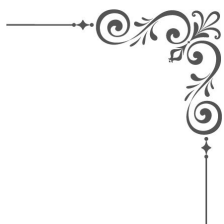
“I don’t think he wanted you to marry Kent.”

“He didn’t.” She chuckled. “He wanted me to marry you.”

Colt took her hand and brought it to his mouth as he kissed her fingers. “And you shall, my love. As soon as we can bury my father,

I will marry you and make you mine. Forever.”

She leaned down and kissed him briefly on the mouth. “That’s the best thing I’ve heard all day.”



EPILOGUE

Blaze sighed with satisfaction as she cuddled next to her husband on the bank, the sound of the stream gurgling in the background was soothing music to her ears. She and Colt had been married for a full twenty-four hours now, and she hadn't been able to leave his side. They stayed in a room at the hotel until nightfall, and then they snuck out and went to the stream. There, they kissed more, and made love, then cuddled while they talked about their dreams for the future.

The wedding had been perfect. Small, with only family and a few friends there. Kent had miraculously disappeared, which was disappointing because she truly wanted to see Colt punch him in the face.

Although the death of George had been hard to handle, at least she had Colt – and he had her. Thankfully, they were married the next day because she wasn't sure how much longer she could go without being Colt's wife. It made her happy that he had seemed just as anxious, especially to consummate their marriage.

"Colt?" she asked as she drew a finger across his bare chest.

"Yes, my love."

She smiled, loving to hear him say that. "Did you really mean what you told your father about making Last Chance your home?"

He shifted on the blanket, facing her a little more as he stared into her eyes. "Yes. I'll do anything to make you happy."

"I want to make you happy, too."

He chuckled. "I'm ecstatic just being your husband, my beautiful

wife.”

“Stop teasing. You know what I mean.”

“I do know, but I’m not teasing. I will follow you to the ends of the earth. I’ll never let you go now. So, if you want to stay here until we’re old and gray, then I’ll be by your side. And if you want to move to another state, I’ll do everything I can to make it possible.”

She grinned. “Yes, because you’re rich now.”

He cupped the side of her face. “I’m rich in love. Money doesn’t matter to me unless you are going to share it with me.”

She nodded. “Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere. When I thought you had left me, I was miserable. I’ve never been so heartbroken before. I don’t want to feel like that ever again.”

“I know how you feel because when I thought I was too late to stop your wedding, I didn’t know how I could go on living without you.”

She leaned over and kissed his sweet lips. “I love you, Colt.”

“Not as much as I love you.”

Chuckling, she shook her head. “Let’s not make this our first argument as husband and wife.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Why not? It’ll be fun to make up afterward, don’t you think?”

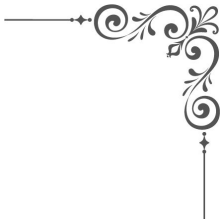
“Just as long as you have that kind of attitude when we argue about something during our marriage, I’ll be happy. Communication is what will keep us together, along with trust and love.”

“And speaking of love...” He wrapped her in his arms, pulling her closer. “How soon do you want a baby?”

She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Besides, practice makes perfect.”

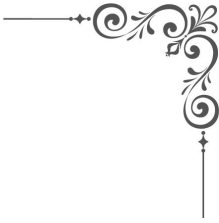
When they kissed, she was reassured again that their love would last forever.

THE END



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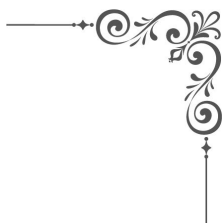
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Author's Bio

Marie Higgins is an award-winning, best-selling author of clean romance novels that melt your heart and have you falling in love over and over again. Since 2010, she's published over 90 heartwarming, on-the-edge-of-your-seat romances. In addition, she's broadened her readership by writing mystery/suspense, humor, time-travel, paranormal, along with her love for historical romances. Her readers have dubbed her "Queen of Tease" because of all her twists and unexpected endings.

Website – <https://www.authormariehiggins.com>

Facebook – <http://www.facebook.com/marie.higgins.7543>

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